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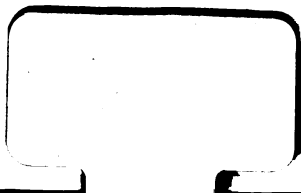
THE SPOILERS



BY EDWIN PUGH

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Good idea!



THE SPOILERS







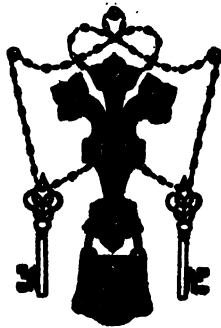
**It was not from the mangled corpse that he fled down
the hill, but from himself**

Frontispiece, p. 295

THE SPOILERS

BY EDWIN^{William} PUGH

ILLUSTRATED⁴
BY C. E. BROCK



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THE SPOILERS

FIRST CHAPTER

RETURNING TO THE WORLD

THE four-wheeled cab with the drawn blinds rolled slowly along the Embankment and drew up with a sharp jerk outside New Scotland Yard. Two men alighted from the cab. One was a police official in plain clothes ; the other, by token of his regulation grey suit and bowler hat, was not less obviously a convict, just released from Wormwood Scrubbs and brought to headquarters for his ticket. They entered the building, walking in step. A short passage led them to a clean, bare office. There the convict was given some miscellaneous advice and a printed sheet of paper. He accepted both in silence.

“You may go now,” said the man behind the desk.

The convict donned his hat and stalked out. He was a big man, tall and well-proportioned.

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His face was one not easily to be missed or forgotten. It was a face full of forceful expression : dark, vividly coloured, the features bold, having a rugged cragginess of outline. The eyes, large, restless, bright, were shaded by prickly black brows. There was a suggestion of heavy bone under the tight-drawn tanned skin of the cheek and square-hewn jaw. He wore a moustache with a short, stiff beard and whiskers.

As he stood there in the full sunshine a man in the uniform of the Salvation Army strode briskly up to him and clapped him on the shoulder.

The ticket-of-leave man wheeled about with a lowering scowl ; then, scarce deigning to glance at his interlocutor, he turned his back on him.

The other extended a big red hand.

“ Brother. . . ”

“ Go an’ scrape yourself ! ” was the response.

He moved forward suddenly with a dogged shake of the shoulders, hustling the Salvationist out of his path. He crossed the muddy road, leaned his elbows on the parapet, and gazed down at the turbid water lapping the smooth grey stones.

It was a fine day in mid-autumn. The sun shone with a coppery lustre through a veil of pearly haze. The water flashed forth flashes of gold. Ranging eastward, in a noble curve,

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the young trees tossed their flaming heads under the rude caress of the wind. Across the river, as it seemed, the sombre dome of St. Paul's Cathedral reared its mighty convex above the crazy chimney-stacks.

“Brother. . . .”

Again it was the voice of the Salvationist.

The ticket-of-leave man growled impatiently. Without troubling to turn from contemplation of the smoke-wreathed scene, he uttered over his shoulder :

“Tell you what it is, ole Blood-an'-fire, I've 'ad all the lip-salve I require from you, already. I bin five years an' a 'alf in stir. A miserable sinner. As the parsons didn't forget to tell me.” He paused. “If you want to know my name,” he resumed, as the Salvationist did not depart from him, “it's Marketer—Chick Marketer. P'raps you remember it. If you don't there's a matter o' three rozzers as 'll only be too pleased to give you my private history pat. Two on 'em wi' broken jaws, an' one wi' the back of his skull all starred like a piece of frosted glass. Nice-lookin' men they was too, an' good talkers. Jest about your weight.” He spat. “Don't you think your dinner might be gettin' cold, cully ?”

The Salvationist began to chuckle and crow joyously.

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“ Well, Chick,” he said, “ I’d ha’ known you anywhere.”

Marketer turned then and confronted him. His eyes searched the missionary’s face.

“ Fix ? ”

“ Yes. Your good ole Bill, dear lad.”

“ Ought to ha’ bin Guy.”

“ Don’t you like ’em ? ” He caressed his flowing whiskers. “ They’re the best ole Hyams could let me ’ave.”

“ Come off a cocoa-nut, I reckon. . . . Who told you—— ? ”

Bill Fix screwed up one side of his face.

“ Got the office. Never mind ’ow,” he said. “ Didn’t know to a day, though. Bin ’angin’ about the Scrubbs an’ then ’ere for nigh on three weeks, I ’ave, clobbered up like this.”

“ What for ? ”

“ What for ? ” Fix’s eyebrows climbed his forehead. “ Now, there’s a question for you to ask ! ”

“ A question for you to answer too.”

“ Why, Chick, I didn’t want you to think, when you come out, as all your pals had give you the go-by.”

“ I believe you. An’ now we’re both liars.”

“ I wanted to show you you wasn’t forgotten.”

“ You did ! That’s why you was so careful, then, not to come near me all the time I was



“ Well, Chick,” he said, “ I’d ha’ known you anywhere ”

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under remand, I s'pose. That's why you let me lay an' rot an' eat putty bread an' drink gaol soup—warm water what they'd washed up the dinner things in. That's why I never 'ad no lawyer or nothin'. An' nobody to swear I was a mis-born angel. That's why you an' all them other slack-backs kep' so precious dark all the time an' let me pay for all. That was your friendliness, was it! G-r-r-r! Tell you what it is, Bill, I'd tip you over that there wall an' give you a swim wi' the sewer rats if it wasn't for the iron you're goin' to give me."

"What a pity!" cried Fix. "I never brought nothin' out."

"You'll take less back."

"Chick——!"

"Bung it." He held out his open hand under Fix's nose.

"'Ow much——?"

"All you got. An' if you stick to half a fadge I'll. . . No, I won't drown you. I'll take you by the scruff o' the neck an' march you across to the Yard yonder. You was very clever, Bill, you was, when you put on that there jersey an' 'at, but it tells a tale. It shows you ain't too anxious—not just at present—to be recognised by the tiggies. See?"

"Would a quid——?"

"Bli' me! I'll put you in your gaudy 'at if you don't parker quick!"

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Bill Fix dipped into his breeches-pocket and handed over a handful of mixed coins.

"That the lot?" asked Marketer, stowing away the money. He grinned. "Now we'll go on the everlastin' bust, Bill."

"Won't you come to the ken first?"

Marketer winked. "Bit eager to get me on the job again, ain't you? Nice lot o' graft waitin' for Chick to do, I s'pose. But Chick ain't 'avin' any, not till he's had a look round. . . . P'raps you won't believe me, Bill, but what d'you think I bin doin' ever since that there ole swine of a judge put the seven stretch on me? What d'you think? Why, I bin makin' plans agin the day I come out. All the time I 'ave. Over an' over agin, I've made 'em. I started at it as I was bein' took out o' the dock to the cells. An', barrin' when I was asleep, I ain't left off once since. Rollin' up them balls o' twine, leggin' it round the exercise-yard, wheelin' the trucks down at the quarries—it's always bin the same. Always makin' arrangements for when my time was up. I've laid awake o' nights an' worked it out. I've shut my eyes an' seen myself doin' the things. Breakin' a bottle o' the 'boy' at Gibbon's. Strollin' up the Strand on a Sat'd'y night. With all the 'lectric lights a-blazin'. An' the people pushin' agin me. The 'buses rattlin' by an' the cabs. An' whistles goin' outside the theatyters.

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An' big commissionaires wi' umbrellas an' wheel-baskets, showin' plump rosy gels into their carriages wi' bits o' bare arm an' neck peepin' out, an' any quantity o' lace. An' their little 'ands in white gloves, pickin' up their flounces to give their fancy blokes a treat in the way o' stockin's an' ankles. I've seen all that. An' I've seen myself. . . . Ah, I've seen myself a size bigger 'n life, sittin' wi' the nobs an' tits in Rotten Row—my word!—an' brassin' up my deaner for a chair an' raisin' my 'at an'. . . . What's that, Bill?" He started, gripped his companion's sleeve.

"On'y Big Ben strikin'."

"What time is it? No, don't tell me. What do it matter?" He rubbed the palms of his hands together. "Funny! So different yesterday it was. Some interest, then, in knowin' that another hour was gone. Now. . . ." He laughed. "Time's my own. It belongs to me. I can do what I like with it. 'Oard it up, or spend it. Why, Bill, I could pity you, you mouldy ole two-forked parsnip! *You* don't know what freedom is. *You* ain't never bin in stir. That's where I'm one up agin the world! But I was tellin' you. I've seen myself goin' to a nice little restyaurant an' doin' myself in style. With a napkin an' all, an' a feller in a claw-hammer coat an' a biled shirt to wait on me while I eat. I've seen myself 'avin' a gin-an'-

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bitters an' then a fat quart bottle o' Bass. Soup I've seen myself 'avin' that wasn't the corned-beef variety, neither. An' a snack o' fish an' a crisp brown ontray, wi' a nice juicy undercut off a good sirloin to foller. An' a omelette. An' a truffle in aspect. Like what the fly-flats used to stand us, Bill, down at Crematori's."

Fix nodded gravely.

"That's what I've seen myself doin'," said Marketer. "An' now, by my cadaver! I'm goin' to 'ave some mustard an' salt an' pepper wi' my dreams."

"It'll cost a bit, Chick."

"Matters not. Ain't the money yours? But, I say, you can't come along o' me in that get-up, y'know."

Bill Fix cast a rueful eye over his dazzling raiment. "What'd I better do, then?"

"'Ome sweet 'ome, you," said Marketer, maliciously.

"No," cried Bill Fix, who did not mean to lose sight of an old comrade so opportunely met. "No, Chick, I won't leave you. I'll wait outside while you get it down you."

"Step it, then."

"We'd better cross the road 'ere."

"Well, wait till the traffic slackens down a bit."

"Traffic! What traffic?"

"All these 'ere——"

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"Two growlers an' a mud cart."

"There's a 'ansom further up."

Bill Fix stared. Marketer, whose hands were oddly restless, uttered a thin, nervous laugh.

"Right y'are," he said, with a poor assumption of ease, and stepped into the roadway. He was hurrying across at a brisk trot, when a raucous hooting sounded close at hand and a motor-car buzzed round the corner, snapping and hissing spitefully. Bill Fix stood still to let it pass. But Marketer seemed suddenly smitten crazy. He darted forward, drew back, wheeled . . . then ran, as a dizzied cat runs, straight ahead of the vehicle. Fix saw him swerve and duck. The chauffeur put on the brake, hard. The passenger yelled an angry warning. His yell was echoed horribly in an eldritch screech from Marketer.

Then the car stopped. Fix rushed forward, seized Marketer by the elbow and dragged him on to the opposite pavement.

"What the good year——?" he exclaimed.

"'Old me up!" gasped Marketer. "I'm goin' to faint, Bill."

He was sprayed from head to foot with a feather of yellow mud. His face was of the colour of a sodden rag, and wet as if he had dipped his head into a bucket of water. With tremulous, gaping mouth, and leaden-hued lips he reeled and bore on Fix for support, shuddering in every fibre.

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"What took you?" cried Fix. "I never see——"

"It was that there blue-bottle thing," Marketer whispered thickly. "I dunno. My nerve's gone." He wiped his streaming face and sniggered. "Anybody notice me, Bill, d'you think?" He gazed around as if he expected to confront a jeering multitude. A few miserable vagrants, arrested in their moody prowling by the outcry and the stoppage of the motor-car, lingered in their vicinity. "Tell 'em if they don't 'op it, Bill, I'll put 'em in their 'ats," said Marketer, recovering his native ferocity, though he still spoke in laboured gasps.

Fix nodded. "'Ere cut it, Funny-face," said he, addressing himself to a loathly tramp, and forgetting in his agitation his sanctimonious apparel, "or I'll put the kybosh on you in less'n 'alf o' no time."

The tramp showed his toothless gums derisively.

"G'out!" he said. Then he hitched up his pants and shuffled off.

"Hail a cab, Bill," said Marketer. "I'll drive to Gibbon's."

Bill did so. They climbed in. Their way lay through Northumberland Avenue and Trafalgar Square.

As they rattled along Fix marked shrewdly how Marketer's big strong hands trembled on

RETURNING TO THE WORLD

the edge of the apron. When foot-passengers, crossing the road, passed before them within a few inches of the horse's nose, Marketer would, all unconsciously, clutch at his sleeve. Once the cabman had to rein in his horse somewhat sharply to avoid a waggon. Marketer exhaled a sighing breath and started up from his seat.

"Gibbon's" was a small restaurant situate in one of the many shabby-genteel streets that debouch on Shaftesbury Avenue.

"You get out fust," said Marketer, though he was on the near side. He followed Fix gingerly. "You pay the cabby," he whispered, slipping a coin into Fix's hand.

"Now you go in an' feed," said Fix. "I'll wait about."

"Dessay a bit o' grub might steady me. Eh, Bill?"

"Sure to."

"I wish you was comin' in wi' me."

"It don't matter."

"You won't go away."

"Not me."

"That's right, Bill."

He patted Fix gently on the shoulder; then entered the eating-house.

He sat down at a table near the door, whence he could catch occasional glimpses of the red and blue uniform through a gap in the window hangings.

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"Yes, sare?" murmured a waiter, bending over him.

"Gin-an'-bitters. Orange."

"Yes, sare."

The aperitif was brought on a tray. Marketer picked it up, sipped, set it down again abruptly.

"'Ere" he called out to the waiter. "This gin-and-bitters?"

"Yes, sare."

"Orange bitters?"

"Yes, sare."

"Tastes bloomin' rum!"

"Oh, no, sare, gin!" the waiter protested.

Marketer sipped again doubtfully.

"Take it away," he said. "Can't stomach it at any price. An' bring me a quart o' Bass, cock, instead."

"Yes, sare."

Marketer unfolded his napkin and rubbed his lips with it vigorously. This gin-and-bitters fell very far short of the piquant liquor of his dreams. And he had used to be so fond of gin-and-bitters.

The waiter brought him *hors d'œuvres*. Marketer tried a strip of cured herring.

"Brine!" he spluttered. "Ugh!" He blinked and coughed. "Lively wi' that Bass," he bawled.

"Yes, sare."

The waiter filled a long glass. The creaming

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beer, richly yellow, sizzling with tiny, eddying bubbles, was just as Marketer had pictured it at numberless Barmecide feasts. He lifted the tumbler and drank deep. But the savour pleased him not at all. He felt a premonitory sinking of the heart.

The waiter set soup before him.

“ Place changed 'ands ? ” asked Marketer.

“ No, sare.”

“ This Bass—— ”

“ Ze best, sare.”

Marketer dipped his spoon into the soup.

“ What d'you call this 'air-wash ? ”

“ *Consomme aux* Persian Pearls.”

“ Perishin' pearls, eh ? ”

He tasted warily.

“ 'Ere,” he said, with a wry mouth. “ You can make a necklace out o' this. I don't fancy it.”

The waiter, torn between amazement at the conduct of his eccentric customer and joy in the profit that would accrue from so much uneaten provender, removed the soup and brought fish.

It was turbot with caper sauce. Marketer, his palate debauched by a long experience of coarse, strong food, forced himself to eat a little ; but it lay on his tongue insipidly and he only swallowed it with difficulty.

So it was with the roast sirloin and potatoes

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fondantes, the *vol au vent* of lamb sweetbread, the *crepinette* of fowl and French beans, the pheasant and chips and *asperges en branches*. All seemed to turn to dust and ashes in his longing mouth. He could have groaned aloud in a sickening regret as each dish passed away from him. The ice pudding brought a dull pain to his head in the region of the eyes. Only one course did he enjoy: the cheese; and that because oaten biscuits were served with it, reminding him of the prison bread.

The beer went flat in the mockingly tall glass. In his impotent rage of defeat he had splashed the napery with flying goutts of gravy and morsels of meat and vegetables that slowly coagulated under his eyes. He could have shed scalding tears as the fabric of his visions dissolved in the fires of reality. Forlornly hoping against hope that some one item on the bill might even yet fulfil his anticipations, he nerved himself to order a liqueur and a cigar. He ordered brandy; it seared his lips. He lit the cigar and his stomach rolled in protest.

Then he commanded the waiter to bring the bill. That alone exceeded his expectations. He had one small, sweet thrill of joy in flinging down a kingly tip. Then he took his hat and quitted the place, empty and hungry and miserable.

SECOND CHAPTER

THE OLD THREADS

WHILST Marketer was in the restaurant, Bill Fix had been effecting a change in his wardrobe. He had gone to a second-hand clothier's hard by, one of the many shops of that kind which usually abound in cosmopolitan neighbourhoods; and had made an arrangement with the Hebrew proprietor whereby he acquired a rough frieze ulster and a bowler hat in exchange for his red-banded peaked cap and a few shillings. (For Mr. Fix, despite his passionate protests, had not handed over all his ready cash to his dear friend.) Thus attired and divested of his false beard, he stood revealed in his true colours as a small, wiry man of sixty, with a puckered, livid face and a crooked mouth. Marketer having commented boisterously and even irreverently on his altered appearance, Fix inquired:

“An' 'ow did you go on the grub stakes, Chick?”

For a moment it was in Marketer's mind to vent his spleen in a garnished description of the

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unfortunate meal he had not eaten ; but an odd sense of shame constrained him. He rolled his eyes and patted his waistcoat.

"Glad o' that, ole dear," murmured Fix, sympathetically.

"Jest right it was," said Marketer.

His head was aching. The noise and bustle of the streets confused and harried him. The unclean odour of the gutters and the close, confined air weighed heavily upon his senses. An acrid bitterness surged up in him, and when he spoke again his voice sounded oddly shrill from peevishness.

He was consumed with sudden desire to feel the wash of cool air on his stiffening, heated face. They went, then, to Piccadilly Circus and mounted a red omnibus.

They jogged along to Hyde Park Corner. "Get out 'ere?" asked Fix.

"Not 'ere," Marketer replied. These two words were the first he had uttered since the ride began.

"What's the matter wi' you, Chick?"

"Surprised stomach," said Marketer grimly.

The omnibus lumbered on. Marketer sat leaning forward, his mouth set in a lipless line, his eager gaze ranging avidly over the tree-embowered prospect. Something of delight in his freedom began to warm his heart at last. The hectic beauty of the autumnal foliage ; the lush,

THE OLD THREADS

level greenness of the turf ; the life and movement and colour so abundantly rife everywhere in each new opening vista, kindled a light of satisfaction in his jaded eyes ; his cheeks mantled.

At the Broadway they alighted and entered a public-house. This at the instigation of Fix. Marketer gulped down a brandy-and-soda. The first effects of the draught were disquieting ; but that passed, and he felt stimulated. He began to talk and to laugh. He even braved the horrors of another cigar. Then they left the place, boarded an electric car, and were conveyed to Kew Bridge.

They spent the later hours of the afternoon strolling beside the Thames. It was a fine evening. Twilight fell upon the placid scape like a soft breath of blessing, glorifying all things. The river shone with a pale sheen that made a rippling, red-flecked path pointing toward the westering sun. In the blue vault above, the stars peeped forth benignly ; the argent globe of the autumn moon poured out its glistening store of silver.

Bill Fix waxed sentimental after the fashion of his kind. He protested that he felt for Marketer an affection passing the might of words. Marketer laughed ; but he too was conscious of softening influences in the simple wonder of the gloaming. They turned and walked back

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toward the bridge, spanned by a gentle arc of lights. Other gleams, yellow and wavering, pinked the misty distance. Behind the trees on the left bank a nacreous glare illumed the sky.

They returned to the pulsing heart of the city. Marketer nodded in his seat as the car hummed swiftly, smoothly eastward. He roused at Hammersmith Broadway; and there was nothing for it but they must pledge each other again. They must smoke again.

"I'm comin' to life, Bill, comin' to life," said Marketer, with a deep-seated chuckle, as they lounged in the tawdrily-splendid bar. "You're a good pal, Bill. It's a rare world. We'll be 'appy to-night."

It was in this ebullient mood he continued on the journey. At Piccadilly Circus, Marketer realised another dream when he swaggered magnificently into the Criterion bar. There were other noble sportsmen present in evening dress, displaying tracts of unblemished shirt-front that cried aloud for bill-posters.

From that resplendent scene they passed to a big stucco building in the near vicinity: a palace of brilliant lights and soft tones, with purviews of warm pushed vestibule beyond the broad white steps. The doors gaped like a red maw to engulf them. The man in the box-office liked not Fix's rough frieze ulster; but Marketer's gold over-rode his prejudices. They passed

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noiselessly through mirror-lined corridors, throwing countless prismatic refractions, into the auditorium, and sat down.

It was all very familiar, yet strange, to Marketer. In the piping times of bygone days when his luck was in and his pockets were lined with coin, he had often ruffled it here over his court of meaner scoundrels, parasites and toadies, all humbly bowing down before his larger personality. How he had exulted, at such times, in the consciousness of his own superior attainments. They were wild nights! My faith! Nights of red revelry to be lived o'er again, or so he vowed, in the unfettered future before him!

But as he sat watching the antic figures on the stage, his elation died in a stupid obsession of drowsiness. It was the prison hour for sleep. The habit of the years was still heavy upon him. He dozed.

The music crashed in his ears. Hurrying feet went back and forth. Voices rose and fell murmuringly, fitfully. He dreamed. . . . And bitterly persuaded himself that he had just awakened from a dream. The walls of his cell closed in about him. He saw the first dim flicker of light stealing through the barred window, casting fantastic shadows on the floor. A bell rang. There was a grinding noise of drawn bolts.

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"Wake up, ole man," said Fix, nudging him.

He opened his eyes and gazed vacantly about.

A woman was dancing on the dusty boards in the footlight flare. From behind him sounded a merry tinkling of glasses. There were hoarse, masculine voices, rising and falling, bursting into occasional loud mirth. There was a swish of silk and embroidery; a tripping stir of mincing feet.

"Let's go 'ome," he muttered thickly.

"What for?" cried Bill Fix; for he was one of those who, loving money for its worthless self, liked to enjoy its full purchasing value when he did part from it.

Marketer vouchsafed no answer; but rose and strode out of the music-hall. Fix, cursing profusely, albeit silently, followed him.

"Bill," said Marketer, when they attained the street, "what about young Deuce?"

"Bin waitin' all day for you to ask that," said Fix.

"I ain't forgot him. Don't think it. But some'ow. . . . Tell me about him."

"He's all right."

"Stayin' wi' Cowcross still?"

"Yuss."

"Cowcross——?"

"Wuss 'n ever."

Marketer regarded him keenly. "'Ow d'you mean?"

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" More religious."

" Looks arter the boy, do 'e ? "

" 'M."

" Right ? "

" Right as pie."

" I'll 'ave him to live wi' me, though," said Marketer thoughtfully, " soon as I can find a kip."

" Reg'lar little plaster saint, the kid is," said Bill Fix.

" All the better," Marketer responded.

There was a period of silence between them. They struck down Villiers Street and mounted the steps to Hungerford foot-bridge.

" Stands the ole ken where it did, Bill ? "

Bill nodded.

" Who's there ? "

" Don't allow no one. 'Tain't safe. Judy drops in now an' then to roust about a bit. An' o' course, the boys call when they get anything . . . Funny thing about Judy."

" 'Er face ? " He cocked a leer.

" She's goin' to get married."

" Goin' to get what ? "

" Married."

Marketer stared. " That kid ? "

" Kid's turned twenty, Chick."

" Love us ! So she must be. What sort o' stuff 'as she turned out ? "

" Bit o' class," said Fix.

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“ And who’s the victim ? ”

Fix grinned. “ Who d’you think ? ”

“ Who ? ”

“ Cowcross.”

“ What the . . . ! ” Marketer’s face expressed mingled incredulity and disgust.

“ Women’s women,” said Fix, cryptically.

“ But that figure o’ fun ! ”

Fix shrugged his shoulders.

“ No concern o’ mine, o’ course ; but—*him* ! ” persisted Marketer.

They crossed to the Surrey side, and, skirting the Westminster Bridge Road, entered a tortuous by-way not far from the New Cut. Their ultimate destination was a little obscure shop. A smoking lamp hung in the window, revealing a few trays of horrible sweets and some filthy, decrepit toys.

“ Looks the same as ever,” Marketer remarked. “ Tain’t even dirtier. S’pose it couldn’t be.”

Bill Fix pushed open the shop-door and entered. A cracked bell tinkled dolorously.

“ All ages ! ” he called out. “ Only me, Judy.”

“ Don’t call me Judy,” snapped a fretful voice. “ Is that Chick with you ? ”

“ Guilty,” Marketer replied. “ An’ ’ow’s your bits an’ things, Judy ? ”

He offered her his hand, but she flounced away. “ You too ! Callin’ me Judy a’ready.”

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"Judith then."

She laughed and bit her lip, then stood frankly considering him.

"What a big chap you are, Chick," she exclaimed.

"You're no smaller'n you was," he retorted. "An' you're a thunderin' sight better-lookin'!"

She smiled her pleasure at the compliment. "Think so?" She touched her hair deftly with her finger tips. "But I'm all any 'ow," she protested. Nevertheless it was plain that she approved herself sufficiently. She was, beyond question, exceedingly comely. Anywhere, that indisputable fact would have been popularly acclaimed. In the squalid environment of her present surroundings she appeared altogether unequivocally lovely; radiantly, even improbably, beautiful. Her pale face peered out, elfinlike, from a very storm of tawny locks. Errant veins of gold ran in and out and through and through her crisping hair as she stood under the pendent lamp. She had dark eyes of an elusive shade, and a full-lipped, pouting mouth. Her chin was broad and fleshy. The cast of her face had a certain squareness of outline.

"D'you like me?" she asked Marketer coquettishly, with a flash of her teeth.

"You'd do for a week-day girl," he said lightly.

Still smiling, she turned to Fix.

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"Now I'm off," she announced briskly. "One penny top and a 'ap'orth o' locust is what I've sold. It's bin a good day. Three 'a'pence. There y'are."

She handed him the money, then took her hat and cloak from a peg and put them on.

"Far to go, Judith?" asked Marketer.

"Not far."

"What a pity! 'Cos I'm comin' wi' you."

"Not me, you ain't," she replied with decision.

"All right," he said, indifferently. He sat down on the edge of the counter and yawned.

Judith tilted her chin sharply. Plainly she was piqued.

"Long time a-puttin' on your things, ain't you?" Fix asked her, tactlessly, as she slowly fastened together the buttons and loops of her cloak. She turned on him with a face of rancorous fury.

"What the everlastin'-world-without-end 'as it got to do wi' you 'ow long I am?" she demanded.

"Piff!" said Fix. "You're like some bloomin' worsted thing, Judy."

She came round behind the counter.

"Glad you ain't goin' to see me 'ome, ain't you?" she sniffed, addressing Marketer.

"Too sleepy to tell you," he replied, putting his hand to his mouth.

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She made a scornful grimace at him, pulled the door open, and with a contemptuous flick of the heel, swung out into the street.

"Fine gel!" reflected Marketer. "But wants a thorough good bastin'."

"Rare ole paddy on her, she's got," Fix grumbled. "An' she gets wuss every day."

"Is she crook?"

"Not since Cowcross got 'old of her."

"What's she do?"

"Sewin' an' that. Lives on her own, entirely."

Marketer yawned again. "Where do I sleep? Wi' the fleas?"

"Nice feather bed upstairs."

"*She* make it?"

"I s'pose so," said Fix.

"Well, I'll 'ave a tot an' get to it. What are you churning up your brains for? No liquor in the 'ouse?"

"Sorry, Chick."

"Don't matter," said he. "Get some in to-morrow, that's all. I say Bill, do you sell candles?"

"Got some somewhere."

"Gi' me 'alf a dozen."

Fix gaped at him. "What for?"

"To eat, o' course," said Marketer irritably. "Come on, you mutton-headed old shyster. Bung 'em over."

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Fix, with a puckered face, groped under the counter and brought up a handful of candles, all dirty, some broken. Marketer snatched them from him, stuffed them into his pocket. "Now show the way," he said.

Fix took the shop lamp from its hook on the ceiling and preceded him upstairs.

"I shall be only a little lower'n the angels, any'ow," remarked Marketer. "This it?" He followed Fix into a big room on the top floor. It was shabby, but clean. The bed was of the old-fashioned, postered kind, piled high with mattresses and pillows. There were two chairs and a table.

"Got any books?" asked Marketer.

"Books?"

"Things you read, Bill. I bin wantin' to read in bed for more'n five years. Some'ing interestin'. Not Shakespeare."

"I'll see what there is," said Fix, who was too well used to the vagaries of men newly released from prison to be deeply astonished by Marketer's manifold whims. He shambled out of the room.

When he had gone Marketer extracted the candles from his pocket, set them up in a row on the mantelpiece, and lit them. He rubbed his hands and laughed delightedly at the brave show they made. Then he began to pace the room, back and forth, slowly. As he trod each

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step, he counted, thus: "One—two—three four—five. One—two." Here he turned. "One—two—three—four—five. One—two." He turned again. Five minutes passed and still he kept on pacing to and fro. And it was noteworthy that, though the room measured some eighteen feet in length, he did not once extend his course beyond half that distance. His restless figure, turning again and again on its tracks, was suggestive of that of some wild, caged beast. It was as if he were confined within invisible strong bars.

The shuffling sound of Fix's returning footsteps roused him from his moody exercise. He halted abruptly, uttered a low cry. He realised then, that he had been traversing the exact dimensions of his old cell. He walked to the wall and began to sidle along it, that he might make the circuit of the room. He was rounding the table when Fix appeared, laden with a pile of dirty volumes.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "What the——?"

"You shut your face," said Marketer, flushing. He went on past the table, into the corner against the window, then by way of the hearth and the side of the bed back to the door again.

"Potty, ain't you?" grinned Fix.

"What books are they?"

"All sorts. *Social Notes*, 1862 to 1864. *Sunday at Home*, 1882."

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Marketer took them from him and put them on a chair beside the bed.

“That’s all I shall require, my man, at present,” he said, with facetious pomposity. “Let me sleep as long as I like in the mornin’. But when I bang on the floor bring me up a rum-an’-milk an’ a jug o’ ’ot water. Oh, an’ some carpet slippers an’ a newspaper. Now you may go.”

“Thank you, your lordship.”

Marketer, left alone, began to undress leisurely. He folded up his clothes one by one, and placed them in a neat pile at the foot of the bed. His head was on the pillow before he remembered that to be orderly and methodical was no longer incumbent on him. He threw off the sheets, slipped out of bed, and proceeded to scatter his garments broadcast over the floor. Then, with a satisfied smile, he climbed in again.

His body sank into the soft feather bedding. The heaped-up pillows buckled under the pressure of his head. He dug his elbow into them, picked up a book and began to turn the leaves.

It was very hot. The heavy blankets and thick counterpane weighed his body down, whilst the yielding surface of the mattress billowed up about him. He could not dispose himself comfortably; but tossed and shifted with cramped limbs, until he had reduced the bedclothes to a chaos of knotted lumps. He began to perspire. His cuticle pringed.

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For a while, by a supreme effort of will, he would lie still and read. But soon he was con-torting himself once more in a vain endeavour to find some ease. He could get none, nor rest for his itching, sweating body on that unaccustomed soft couch. An hour passed and his late drowsi-ness had given place to feverish activity of mind and physical misery. He threw down his book, turned on his back, and held his clenched fists high above him in his impotent rage.

“So it seems I ain’t served all my time yet,” he said to himself, with a strangled sob.

He sat up and let his bare feet slip down on to the floor. He stood shivering in the draught from the window and from under the door. His weary flesh was aching as if it were bruised ; his brain seemed numbed with overmuch thinking. He craved surcease from his haggard plight in the oblivion of sleep. And sleep was denied him.

Sighing, he dragged a blanket from the bed, wrapped it about him tightly, and lay down on the bare boards.

THIRD CHAPTER

THE HELL THAT PETER COWCROSS MADE

THE speaker on the platform looked to be about fifty years old. He was short of stature, hoary-headed and rather slightly built. But there was nothing mean or undignified in his outward aspect, despite his somewhat shabby clothes and the unkempt state of his hair and beard. His face was gnarled and sallow. He had heavy, overhanging brows, from which tufts of coarse grey hair bristled ferociously. His eyes shone in the shadow of his prominent orbital bones with a dry, metallic lustre. A high-peaked nose drooped at the tip over his lipless mouth. There was no flesh on his long flat chin. That he was strong above the ordinary his knotted, clenched hands testified ; that he was still active and alert was not less plain from the quickness of his movements and the keenness of his glance.

The little mission-hall was clean and well-lighted. A brisk fire leaped in a roomy grate. The walls were hung with illuminated texts. Parallel rows of rough benches ranged down

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the centre of the floor. There sat the audience. Some thirty or forty were assembled : all men, with one exception. She sat at an harmonium on the platform, with her face turned toward the speaker.

The majority of those present had drifted in merely to escape from the outer bleakness and fog. They were creatures, for the most part, whose faces bore indelibly the brand of evil ; for that neighbourhood had long been painted black in the maps of social reformers as " vicious and semi-criminal." One or two were nodding. Some sat with their hands clasped between their knees and their heads hanging down in a semi-stupor of misery and despair. The remainder listened with vacuous faces, watching the figure on the platform as they would have watched a fallen horse or any other commonplace street diversion.

But the speaker seemed not to be aware of their indifference. He spoke rapidly, loudly, with free gestures, striding from end to end of the platform, gripping the rail so tightly from time to time that the bone of his knuckles showed white through the skin.

" Hell !—hell !—hell !— " he chanted. " That is where you are all going to, like the unclean Gadarene swine. The thunder of God's wrath sounds from the skies, and still you rush on heedlessly, headlong to your immortal doom.

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Hell! Hear the sentence of the Most High, as it will surely be pronounced upon you at the Day of Judgment."

He paused to consult a crumpled slip of paper ; and at that moment a burly figure loomed up at the back of the hall and stood there motionless.*

"This is the sentence. 'Depart from me, ye wicked ones. Go hence. Nevermore shall ye gaze upon the face of your Creator. You have chosen, throughout your lives, rather to obey the devil than to obey me. Therefore, with the devil shall you be tormented in Hell. The smoke of your torments shall rise up before me night and day. Your cries shall come up to the foot of my throne for ever and for ever. And I will close my ears against them. You shall have not a blessing but a curse in response to your supplications. The curse of God the Father who made you is upon you. I am God the Son : My curse is upon you also. The curse of the Holy Ghost who sanctified you is upon you. The curse of every saint is upon you because you have defiled my name.'

"Hell! What is it? You — you shall know.

* What follows is virtually a transcript from the preaching of a certain divine (whose name shall not be advertised here). His words are still current in printed form.—AUTHOR'S NOTE.

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“ There lies the sinner chained down on a bed of undying fire. When a man, sick of a fever, is lying on even a soft bed, he finds relief sometimes in turning round. If the sick man lies for long without once shifting his position, his skin peels off, his raw flesh bleeds. How, then, will it be with a man whose body has been lying bound on the scorching, broiling fire of a hundred million years? I pray you,” he cried, stretching forth his hand, “ gaze upon that writhing form stretched on yonder bed of fire. All the body is salted with fire. The fire burns through every bone, every muscle, every fibre. Every nerve is trembling and quivering in intolerable torment. The fire rages within the skull, it shoots out through the eye sockets, it drips from the ears in liquid splashes, it roars in the throat as it roars in a flue. So will mortal sin be punished ! ”

The burly figure at the back of the hall moved forward a little.

“ Now,” continued the preacher, “ come, enter this second chamber with me. You see it is quite small. It contains a girl, a young woman, beautiful—but with the beauty of corruption. She is clad in a shimmering robe that is made of woven fire-strands. On her head is a bonnet of fire. It is pressed close down to her scalp, it scorches her head ; it flays her skin ; it burns into the bone of her skull so that

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a column of smoke goes up. The heat soaks into her brain and melts it."

He paused, surveyed his audience keenly. "You all, no doubt, have suffered from headache." This abrupt fall from the horribly sublime to the prosaically commonplace provoked a guffaw from the burly man. "Think what a headache this girl must have. But see further. She is wrapped in flame, for her apparel is all of forked lightning. If she were on earth she would be instantly consumed. But she is in Hell, where the fire burns always but never consumes. So she stands, wreathed in myriad fiery jets, as she will stand for ever. She counts on her fingers the moments as they fleet slowly by. And every moment is to her as a hundred years. As she counts she remembers that her counting avails nothing to bring the end of her torture, since her torture can never end.

"Ah, dear God of Heaven! thus shalt thou vindicate Thy glory!

"Thou shalt make the sinner as an oven of fire in the time of Thine anger.

"See here, again! Gaze into this dread vault of pain. The roof is red hot. The walls are red hot. The floor is just a thin sheet of red-hot metal. There stands another girl, young and beautiful as the first. Her feet are bare: she has neither shoes nor stockings on her feet. Her bare feet tread the white, glowing floor, strik-

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ing out little sullen sparks. The door of this prison has not once opened since she was first thrust through it. Now she sees that it is opening at last. She rushes forward. She kneels, and long blue tongues of fire lap about her like the petals of a hellish flower of flame. Listen while she speaks. She says, as she clasps her hands together : 'O God, I have been standing here, with my bare feet on this fiery floor, for an infinity of years beyond the reach of memory. No sleep have I, no short forgetfulness. Day and night have I suffered here, unceasingly. Look at my blistered, bleeding feet. Let me feel the cool breath of Heaven for one brief moment, I pray you. O, that in this endless eternity of years I might be free of my anguish for but a single moment !' And Satan answers, with a laugh : 'No, not for a moment shall your suffering cease.' 'Ah, then,' the girl cries out, 'if that be so give my spirit leave to go again among my fellow creatures on earth, though my body remains here, that I may warn them of the punishment which God Almighty metes to sinners.' And the devil answers, yet again : 'Humanity has the Gospel for its guide. Let it hearken to that and believe, for only in faith can there be redemption.' Then that wretched, lost soul wails aloud as it sees the black door closing, closing "

But it was ordained that the preacher should

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perforce leave that last sentence unfinished. For, even as he dwelt thus unctuously on the crowning absurdity of his horrific, pinchbeck Hades, drawing out the words, turning them over and over on his tongue, a sharp cry split the confined air as with a jagged arrow of light. It was the sound of a human voice upraised in mortal terror, a sustained, husky scream, so awful in its suggestion of nameless fear that the audience rose up, panic-stricken.

It was seen that the cry proceeded from the girl at the harmonium. She had fallen on her hands and knees and was beating up the dust in a frenzy. Suddenly she collapsed.

The preacher stood watching her, with a radiant face. "A manifestation!" he exclaimed. "A manifestation!"

"Manifestation my elbow!" roared a strident voice. And the burly man was seen striding resolutely from his seat at the back of the hall. He sprang upon the platform, sweeping the preacher aside with his arm so violently that he fell between the rails and crashed against the front bench, overturning it and the two men who sat upon it. He lay there for a moment, half stunned, blood trickling from his nose.

The burly man knelt beside the stricken form of the lifeless girl and raised her head.

"Water!" he roared. "'Ere, get a move on you, some o' you, damn you!"



The burly man knelt beside the stricken form

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He shook the girl in the clumsy, helpless way of a man.

"It's all right, Judy," he growled in her ear. "Don't make a silly dunce o' yourself over such half-baked, hare-brained truck as him."

"It is—yes—Marketer," gasped the preacher, as he staggered to his feet. "My dear old friend, you have no right to profane——"

"By my cadaver!" the other made terse reply, "if you put your daddlers on her again, I'll set such a mark on you——"

"My friend, there is One who You dare not——"

"Dare not, you miserable stinkpot! Thank your horrible god I'm busy 'ere with this pore gel you've drove off her nut, or I'd come down an' break your back across my knees. Like a burnt stick, I would. You ought to be ashamed o' your dirty self."

Judith stirred in his arms, opened her eyes, sighed.

"That's better. That's bonny," said he.

She fumbled at her hair, then put her hands on his two shoulders as if to push him away.

"No, no. What for?" he whispered. "Let me look arter you, Judy."

She looked up inquiringly into his eyes; then, as if reassured by what she read in them of solicitude, nestled up to him and laid her face

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against his coarse jacket. He patted her back, gently.

"Let me get up," she said. "I am all right now."

He helped her to her feet, holding her tightly round the waist.

The preacher, smearing the blood across his grizzled mazzard in a broad red streak, seized the rail and tried to scramble upon the platform. Marketer raised a leg, the only limb he had left at liberty, and with his foot pushed—rather than kicked, the man back.

"You ought to know me better 'n that, Cowcross," he said. "Ain't I warned you fair a'ready not to come within hittin' reach? You do it agin—you ole scare-head!—an' I wouldn't give a bunch o' catsmeat for your measly carcase. . . . Come, my dear," he said to the girl. "Let me get you out o' this. 'Old on to me. Put your arm round 'ere. That's the time o' day, my pet."

"Judith!" cried Cowcross, "I refuse to permit you to accompany that man or to suffer the indignity of his protection."

She seemed to waver for an instant, as she glanced at the preacher's face; but in the end permitted Marketer to lift her bodily down from the platform and lead her toward the door. Once the distracted Cowcross made a movement in their direction, then faltered, covered his face

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with his hands as if to shut out some unholy vision, and dropped down on one of the benches. The assembled people began to file out in the wake of Marketer and Judith, quite briskly and light-heartedly, as they had been galvanised into new life by this unexpected breeze of excitement that had blown across the proceedings.

That outer world, upon which the man and the girl emerged in the centre of a curious throng, was inexpressibly dreary of aspect. A thin brown fog obscured the street-lamps. The pavement was greasy underfoot. The windows of the squalid houses glooming down upon them, made patches of a bilious mistiness in the rolling, smoky mirk.

"It's all right, Chick," said Judith, struggling feebly to disengage herself from his embrace. "I can walk on my own now."

She plucked at his hand with her fingers.

"Let me take you 'ome."

"No, no," she almost implored him.

"I've arst you," he said. "An' you won't. So now I must tell you to. An' you will."

She gazed pathetically at him with sad, doubting eyes. He nodded and smiled. "You'll 'ave to," he said, almost fiercely.

She submitted meekly to his will; and he bore her off across the road in triumph.

FOURTH CHAPTER

A BIOGRAPHY IN OUTLINE

PETER COWCROSS belonged to a type which, though happily uncommon, is by no means rare. He was the son of a Methodist preacher. His father had been a rich man in all things save this world's store. He had a wife and children, a pleasant home, a quiet conscience, and the love and respect of all who knew him. He had his duties and did them honourably. He had his sorrows and bore them manfully. And if his sorrows be reckoned among his blessings it should be no matter of surprise ; since sorrows can be as potent as joy to mellow the heart, enlarge the soul, and add to the fulness of being. The family lived in the country. The children were brought up healthily and heartily. They were taught to cultivate and treasure all that is good in the world and humanity : the beautiful in art and nature, the delights of out-door life and sport, the love of their fellow creatures, strength of mind and tenderness of feeling and abiding charity.

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The elder Cowcross died—a happy man, because he had been a good one. Peter was then eight years old and the youngest of the flock. His mother married again. The man she espoused was also a preacher ; but there his resemblance to her late husband ceased. He was a very religious man. He was (to be literal) a damnable religious man—if the expression be allowable. He made Peter's childhood unutterably miserable with his rotten Calvinism. The boy hated him. All the children hated him. He was like a cold black cloud in the house. He broke his wife's spirit and made of her a mere pale echo of himself. He frightened all the natural joy and brightness out of his step-children's lives. In common fairness to him, however, it ought perhaps to be admitted that he did not spare himself either. He was always practising supererogatory acts of self-denial ; and at last he fretted himself into a state of abject neurosis, and died. His death was unregretted. Indeed—as how could they help being ?—the children were secretly overjoyed when his remains were put underground, though they snivelled into their handkerchiefs by the graveside with dutiful hypocrisy. If he had only died a few years sooner, Peter Cowcross would have grown into a different sort of man ; and his step-father's death would then have been the one gracious incident in his history. But

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years of repression and harshness had irrevocably done their work ; Peter was too old to alter.

Imagine a home without flowers, pictures, music, books, colour of any kind. Think of a childhood that was all gloom, a religion that was all prayer and no praise. Peter grew to reflect that if these Calvinistically-minded folk were right there was no need to have a Hell for lost, dead souls, as well as a Heaven for the elect ; that it was a sheer waste to run two establishments ; that it would be sufficient to support only one institution, since the Calvinistic paradise would be quite hell enough for any ordinary, average human being.

Peter's step-father had a sister ; a sour-mouthed old widow, who invariably wore rusty black weeds, and used to be a frequent visitor at the dreary house. It was her custom to bring the children layers of home-made, stony hard-bake. It may be wondered that their step-father should permit them to pander to their carnal lusts by eating this stuff ; but the old lady had money that he hoped to do good with when she died.

One day, after Aunt Abigail had gone, Peter was prowling about the house when he found on the drawing-room mantel-piece a slab of the hard-bake. It tempted him. He was consistently underfed and consequently always hungry. Moreover, the stuff was at least sweet,

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and sweetness is the first thing that children of all ages ask from life. He looked at it, stretched out his hand toward it, then withdrew his hand and peered about the room and listened. There was no one to observe him, and not a sound to alarm. He fingered the hard-bake longingly, then took it boldly into his clutch. It was a big piece, and his mouth watered. He might have one bite anyway. Nobody would know. . . Then the fear of his step-father's awful God entered into his soul. He put back the hard-bake in a frenzy of superstitious terror, and fled from the scene of his great temptation. As he fled the air seemed filled with the wrath of an outraged deity.

Next day, at breakfast, the step-father abruptly inquired: "What has become of that piece of hard-bake that was on the mantel-shelf?"

The children lowered their eyes. How glad Peter was to be able to feel that he, at least, had a clear conscience in the matter. Yet he could not help feeling a troublous sense of guilt. His heart throbbed painfully and he knew that a flush was overspreading his face.

His step-father suddenly exclaimed: "Peter, you have sinned against God!"

Peter protested passionately that he had not stolen the hard-bake—indeed, oh, indeed, he had not!

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“You lie, my son,” said his step-father. “Leave the table at once and go upstairs to your bedroom.”

Peter obeyed, shaken and sick with dread. Presently his step-father followed him. “Confess,” said he, “that you stole the hard-bake.”

Again the boy protested his innocence.

“You only add to the enormity of your sin by lying,” said his step-father. Then he thrashed Peter with a cruel deliberation, and left him there on the floor—a raging, smarting, weeping, broken-hearted child.

The door was locked on him, and all day he stayed up there—cold, hungry, alone, full of self-pity and stormy resentment. In the evening his step-father visited him again and asked him: Was he sorry for his sin? Had he repented and asked God’s pardon? Peter could only repeat that he was innocent—sullenly, rebelliously. His step-father showed neither anger nor sorrow, but thrashed him again and left him.

In the night his mother came creeping and shivering into the room and implored him piteously to confess.

“Oh, believe me, mother, I didn’t take it. Oh, I didn’t, mother, I didn’t,” he sobbed in answer. “Oh, and I am so hungry, mother!” he could not refrain from adding.

“You are a child of the devil,” she said, in

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grotesque mimicry of her lord and master, and went away.

Next morning he awoke — sore, bruised, parched, and famishing. His step-father came once more to him. He talked long and sternly, bitterly upbraiding Peter for incurring the displeasure of God, and asking him not to imperil his immortal soul by a wicked persistence in an evil course. “Make open confession,” said the self-righteous guardian of that poor, abused little body. “Ask forgiveness at the Mercy Seat. Your heavenly Father will forgive you as readily as I will—I, his humble servant.”

That was the position to be reviewed, then. Peter was worn out by this unequal contest of wills. He was cowed, broken. He was heart-sick of solitude and confinement and silence, in bodily need of food and drink, eager to escape from this awful inquisition to which a proud adherence to a principle was subjecting him. Heaven help poor human nature! He confessed to the fault he had not committed.

“Now, why did you not confess before?” said his step-father. “See what pain you have caused. Think how you have angered God.”

Peter cried with a secret bitterness that the man was very far from understanding.

They went downstairs, hand in hand. Peter took his usual seat at the table and forgot his sorrows. The memory of that meal stayed with

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him for many weeks as the most delicious he had eaten. It was scarce finished when a maid knocked at the door.

"I'm so sorry, sir," she said, "but I've found the piece of hard-bake that Master Peter was supposed to have took. I must have knocked it down, dusting. I'm so sorry, sir. It was under the grate."

Peter listened to the maid with a warm thrill at his heart. This was to be his moment of triumph. How ashamed his step-father would be now, how woefully discomfited by this evidence of his injustice! Peter lifted his head and looked at him with something of defiant triumph in his gaze. If there had been one touch of compunction in his step-father's expression it was likely he would have made a bid for his pity by an outburst of lamentation. But his face was full of a terrible scorn of Peter, and Peter's tears seemed to freeze under his sore eyelids. His mother uttered a weak whimper and half rose from her chair. Her husband put her aside with a rigid arm and moved out toward the boy. He screamed and ran to the door. His step-father swooped at him and gripped his shoulder, crushing it.

"Son of Belial!" he cried.

And he thrashed the child for the third time.

The incident left a mark on the boy's soul. As he grew to manhood he grew to a crude

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atheism. He grew to a worse thing. He became an idle rogue, a waster of days. When his step-father died he left the home-nest, went to London and there lost himself. He re-emerged, twenty years later, as a ticket-of-leave man and a well-known associate of thieves.

From the thrall of this criminal dominion he freed himself, however, by the help of a canting mountebank, who toured the country, spitting blasphemy. He enrolled himself a disciple of this suitor at Heaven's back door. He got appointed to lay work, and discovered his gift of lurid oratory. The outcome was his honorary pastorate of the Slant Street Mission-hall, in which we have seen him arraigning wretched fellow mortals for their sins. He earned no money by this ministry, but supported himself by mending shoes, having acquired in prison some knowledge of the craft.

He had lived in that neighbourhood for many years and had known Judith during the main part of her life. Her mother had died when the girl was fourteen or fifteen. She had, even at that early age, been earning her own living for more than two years, and was entirely self-dependent. This disgraceful death of the only parent she had known made the pleasant difference to her that she had no longer to dole out small sums at household crises. The death of her mother happened just after Marketer's arrest and con-

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viction for burglary. Judith had liked Marketer, and Cowcross was his friend. A proof of the intimacy between the two dissimilar men was afforded by the fact that Cowcross assumed charge of Marketer's son as not less than his plain duty. Judith, having all her life played the part of little mother to the boy, was thus brought into continual contact with Cowcross. He speedily obtained a strong ascendancy over her plastic mind. Her allegiance to him was formed half of love and half of fear. He had for her a compelling fascination. She did not know it—naturally; but his personality and his preaching supplied her with just that fierce, strong element of emotional interest in life and death for which her excitement-loving nature craved.

And it was not all an obsession of unhealthy influence that bound her to him. He had been kind and generous to her. He had smoothed rough places in her path. He had pleased her in many ways. He had had her taught music, to play and to sing, partly that she might help him in the work of saving souls, but also because she was fond of sweet sound for its own sake. The prompting to make her his wife came to him in a dream which (to a man of his temperament) had all the sanctity of a divine vision. He asked her straightway to be his wife and the sharer in his spiritual labours. She had no power to resist him, but promised herself readily.

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This, then, was the relation in which they stood to one another before the windy interposition of the big, swashbuckling Marketer.

Marketer had gone to the meeting in all friendliness. He had merely wanted to meet his old fellow sinner of former days, to shake his hand, and to thank him for having taken care of the boy. He had not thought to find Judith in the Mission-hall. He had, at first, as he stood at the back of the audience, been amused by the change in his old comrade; then, as Cowcross grew more and more vehement, he had begun to feel disgusted. For he had unconsciously grown used to a gentler, nobler interpretation of the Gospel of Christianity. It was in an uncontrollable—and, to himself, on reflection, inexplicable—ebullition of indignant resentment of Cowcross's methods and their effect on Judith, that he had stormed the platform and carried off the girl with such finely dramatic effect.

His departure left the preacher dazed. He sat on the bench, a prey to many warring emotions, until the last straggler had departed. His heart was wrung. He brooded there, desolate and forlorn. At last he got upon his feet, sighing, and began to move about the hall, putting the lights out one by one. Then he donned his wide-brimmed hat and black cape, locked the door, and hied him homeward.

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He had not far to go. Five minutes of sharp walking brought him to Parker Crescent, the street in which he lived.

It was an obscure thoroughfare, spanned by a blackened railway arch and abutting on a mews. An enthusiasm for laundry work characterised its inhabitants. The air was damp with steam and heavy with blent odours of soapsuds and scorched linen. He stopped before the murky window of a cobbler's shop and peered in, first rubbing on the glass with a handkerchief to make a clean space. A small boy, in a leathern apron, was hammering briskly in the shop at a boot on the iron. He glanced up. Instantly his expression of absorption changed to one of lively pleasure. His mouth was filled with nails, and his bulging lips, as he smiled, lent a look of wry humour to his face. Cowcross pushed open the door of the shop and entered. The boy spat out the nails into his discoloured palm. He picked up the boot on which he had been at work and exhibited it with pride.

"Yes," said Cowcross, absently, "put it away, Deuce."

The boy looked up sharply.

"Why, dad," he cried, "what 'ave you bin doin' to your face?"

"I think," said Cowcross mildly, "it is time that the shutters were up."

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He strode quickly past the boy and went into a room that opened out of the workshop.

It was a small, congested room. A truckle bedstead stood against the wall. There was no carpet on the floor. The ceiling was smoked to a deep tan colour. The paper on the walls was broken in sundry places, revealing crumbling plaster. The furniture comprised a ragged sofa ; a bureau, every drawer of which stood open overflowing with dirty clothes ; a broken old-fashioned chiffonnière, patched with pieces of rough deal ; three rickety chairs ; a tin pail ; and a table drawn up to the fire. The table was partly littered with writing materials and books. At one end a pink newspaper had been spread in lieu of a cloth. Two plates, with tumblers, knives, forks and spoons, were precisely set out upon it. A shallow dish, covered with a sheet of leather, stood among the ashes in the fender.

Cowcross knelt down in the midst of the clutter and prayed strenuously.

The boy put up the shutters, extinguished the light in the shop and joined his guardian. Finding him still at his devotions he stole softly to a chair, sat down and waited.

“ Now,” said Cowcross at last, “ we will sup to the glory of the Lord.”

He lifted the dish out of the fender and filled the two plates. The meal consisted of fried fish

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from the supper-bar at the corner, and toasted bread.

"Where's Judith?" asked Deuce.

"She is unable to be with us to-night," said Cowcross.

The boy looked puzzled.

"What's up, dad?" he inquired. "You seem all down. Ain't the fish right? I kep' the fire in, too, so's it shouldn't get cold."

"It is not that. No, my quarrel is not with you. You are always a good, thoughtful boy. I am merely troubled in my own mind," answered Cowcross.

The boy nodded gravely.

"Deuce, you would not like to leave me, would you?"

"I should fancy not," was the prompt reply.

"I've always been kind to you? You think so?"

"Of course."

"Never harsh, I trust?"

"No. Never to me."

Cowcross waggled his grey beard. "And you love me, Deuce?"

The boy, as boys will, winced at the tender word.

"'M!" he said, "Rather!"

"You mean that from your heart?"

"Yes, dad. Honour. Why——!"

There was no mistaking the sincerity of the

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boy. His eyes were humid with earnestness.

The cloud passed from the man's face. He smiled radiantly. And, when Cowcross smiled—as he did but rarely—he was wondrously transfigured. The gaunt lines of his leathery countenance smoothed themselves out magically; and the ghost of a dimple showed in his long flat chin.

He rose clumsily from his chair, wiped the grease carefully from his lips, and kissed Deuce full on the mouth.

FIFTH CHAPTER

FATHER AND SON

NEXT day Chick Marketer called on Cowcross. He came in a pacific mood. On entering the shop he proffered his hand across the counter. Cowcross looked up from the boot he was mending, wiped his own hand on his breeches, and shook Marketer's heartily.

"Makes me good, that does," said Marketer, boisterously. "An' I'm right glad there ain't to be no ill-feeling. I never meant, Peter——"

"I am sure you acted without reflection," responded Cowcross. "And I bear you no malice. Make yourself at home."

Marketer perched himself on the inner window-sill where his bulky body obscured the light.

"And how is Miss Judith?" asked Cowcross.

"Ain't seen her since last night. But she soon come round. I forgot, y'know, yes'day, that you was goin' to marry her. P'r'aps I wouldn't ha' interfered if I'd remembered that. But you did come it a bit thick, Peter. An'

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she's only a kid, after all. Rum," he mused, "you marryin' her! Makes me think of a flea an' a elephant tryin' to walk together arm-in-arm in the Garden o' Eden."

"She will, I believe, make a good wife," said Cowcross stiffly.

"But. . . . you!"

"I intend to perform my duty to her, and I have no doubt——"

"'T won't be good enough, Peter. If I know anything about women—an' I bin married myself—they want some'ing more in the way of a husband that a man what only does his duty by 'em. Love an' cherish, y'know. An' wi' my body I thee worship. What sort of a body is yours to worship a young tit like her with? An' if your idea o' lovin' an' cherishin' her takes the form o' givin' her hysterics for breakfast instead of a kiss every mornin' you'll . . . well, you'll have dirty plates an' dishes for dinner an' all the table to yourself."

"I would rather not discuss her with you, Marketer."

"'Ave it your own way. As long as you can, that is," grinned the other. "An' now about Deuce. Where is he?"

"At school."

"When will he be back?"

"Shortly, I expect."

"I'll wait for him."

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Cowcross picked up his hammer. His hand shook a little. "What do you propose to do with regard to the boy?" he inquired.

"Take him to live wi' me," replied Marketer. "Can't let you go on keepin' him."

"I am quite willing that he should stay here."

"I ain't," was the sharp response.

"I shall feel exceedingly lonely without him."

"'Ow about me? An', then, you're goin' to get married. Don't want to start with a ready-made family."

"I know perfectly well that if you insist on your rights I shall have to yield to you," said Cowcross sorrowfully. "But I am very attached to the boy."

"Tell you what," said Marketer, "it's your ideas I don't like. I don't want 'Ell whistled into the kid every day of his life."

"He is very fond of me, too," said Cowcross, as if he had not heard this last remark. "I feel quite sure he would prefer to stay on here if he had his choice."

"Oh, would he?" snarled Marketer, angered by these infelicitous words, and his prickly brows contracted darkly. He had come to the shop more in obedience to an idle prompting of curiosity to see what sort of boy his son had shaped into than from any paternal prompting. He had been impelled by no pressing desire to

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relieve Cowcross of the cares of guardianship. He had meant to assert his parental rights in a teasing spirit, and not too earnestly. Now, however, he was piqued. His shallow, fiery nature flamed with hot jealousy in an instant. . . . But it would be hard to define his feelings exactly, since he did not himself understand them.

“The boy is comin’ to live wi’ me,” he affirmed with stubborn emphasis. “An’ that’s all about it. See?”

“Very well,” said Cowcross, quietly. “As I said before I can’t dispute your legal claims. But. . . it would be kinder, I think, if you permitted him to decide for himself.”

The raw obtuseness here displayed by Cowcross as to the inevitably provocative effect of such a remark on the tinder-like composition of Marketer was instantly apparent.

“I dessay,” sneered the ticket-of-leave man. “After you’ve bin ’avin’ the ’andlin’ of him all these years, makin’ me out a sort o’ bogie to frighten him with. ‘If you ain’t good,’ I can hear you sayin’ to him, ‘your wicked father’ll come an’ take you away in the dark to that patent bake-’ouse I’ve told you about. ‘E lives there,’ I can hear you sayin’, ‘an’ makes pies o’ children.’ Fine thing that, my word!”

“You are under the influence of a totally false assumption, Marketer, if you think for one

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moment that I have ever said a word to him in your disfavour," said Cowcross.

"Come off!" growled Marketer. "Not so much o' the high-fly!"

"I assure you," Cowcross continued, feelingly, "I have never mentioned your name to him—except to remind him to pray for you every night."

Marketer sprang from his narrow seat. "To do *what*?" he exclaimed, livid with new fury. "You canting. . . .!"

He dropped one elbow on the counter with protruding lower jaw, and clenched his fists. His grim, pale face twitched wrathfully.

It was at that inopportune moment the shop-door opened and the boy himself appeared.

He entered humming light-heartedly, his cap in his hand, the wind in his hair. But at sight of the angry, menacing figure of his father all his careless gaiety vanished in a second, as if it had been struck away from his face by a heavy blow. Marketer turned quickly—gulped down his spleen, masked his anger by a prodigious effort, and forced a smile—but it was not a very successful smile.

"'Ullo, sonny," he said, trying to achieve breeziness, and failing again rather dismally.

Deuce regarded him half in fear, half curiously, as he would have regarded some doubtful-looking animal.

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“Don’t you know me?”

Deuce had, indeed, imbibed already an instinctive knowledge of the strange man’s identity. But he shook his head.

“This is your father, Deuce,” said Cowcross. “Don’t be frightened. He has come to take you home.”

Marketer seemed almost grateful for this friendly lead. “Yes,” he repeated, lamely, “I’ve come to take you ’ome.”

“But this is my ’ome,” said Deuce. “Ain’t it, dad?”

“Not now,” replied Cowcross gravely.

“Not now, it ain’t,” echoed Marketer. “No. Your ’ome’s along o’ me now.” He paused awkwardly, a frown gathering on his forehead. “Don’t mean to say—do you?—you don’t remember your father? An’ all the many times you’ve sat on my knee ’fore your mother died?”

Again Deuce shook his head.

“Got a tongue in your ’ead, ’ave you?” Marketer inquired, acridly.

“I. . . .” stammered Deuce.

“Use it, then.” He resumed his seat on the window-sill and thrust his hands deep into his pockets. “Do with a tanner?”

Deuce accepted the coin and said “Thank you,” with real cordiality.

“Ah! an’ now you’re ready enough to come wi’ me, I lay.”

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Deuce's elation subsided suddenly. He looked from his father to Cowcross, then back again from Cowcross to his father; and his face was sufficient reply to the question. Again Marketer began to show anger. So the boy was not to be bribed into showing even a semblance of goodwill. Marketer had hoped much from his silver expedient; had reckoned at least on piquing Cowcross by demonstrating the little worth of his boast that Deuce was fond of him. And, now, it was he who was piqued. Perhaps he had, at that moment, a fuller sense of his loneliness than had ever before assailed him. But, if so, his longing for the love of some human soul—even though it were a love based on self-interest—his heart's response to the appeal of clamant Nature—moved him only to a peevish impatience of his child's plain untowardliness. He was not a man of reason; his life stood warranty for that. It was his misfortune always to stand in the way of his own desires. And so, instead of trying to propitiate the boy, he blustered.

"Don't matter whether you want to come or not," he said roughly, "you've got to, an' there's the pith of it."

He dropped on his feet and stepped quickly forward as if to lay violent hands on Deuce. At least, that is how Deuce construed his intention; backing away from him hastily, fairly

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turning tail at last, and running for refuge behind the counter, where he huddled up against Cowcross. Marketer, stupidly incensed, beside himself with impotent rage, flourished his fist in the cobbler-preacher's face.

"Ah!" he cried. "you're laughin'. Don't say you ain't, you mouldy ole Pharisee! I can see you're laughin', for all you ain't got the pluck to laugh out like a man. You're laughin' to see 'ow well the kid 'as learned the lesson you've bin dingin' into him, all the while I bin away. Fine idea you've give him of me, I will bet. Sort o' Herod I reckon, with a dash o' Charley Peace. Bad, wicked man, me! Used to 'ave babies for breakfast every mornin'."

"My dear Marketer, how foolish this is," said Cowcross, smiling in his own despite at the other's extravagance. "Don't you see you are merely frightening the boy by behaving so absurdly?"

Marketer did see that. With the inevitable result that he was only the more galled. He stretched his big body across the counter, swooped viciously at Deuce. Deuce eluded his heavy clutch.

"Tell him he's got to come wi' me, Cowcross. D'y'ear?" he exclaimed, sourly. "Think I'm goin' to be stood up in the corner by you an' this 'ere young jackanapes like an old umbrella. Tell him what I say, or, spit o'

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my 'and——!" He raised his arm as if to strike.

Cowcross did not flinch before the menacing fist, but leaned toward the furious father. "I thought you knew me fairly well, Marketer," he said. "Don't make the mistake then, my friend, of thinking that because I am a better man than I was I am a weaker man. I am no more afraid of you now, I do assure you, than I was in the old days. Sit down and be reasonable, or——" he paused,—“or, listen to me, I'll fight you for possession of the boy in every court of law in London before I give him up to you.”

Marketer was plainly daunted.

"I only want my rights," he said, sullenly.

"I will do what I can to secure them for you," replied Cowcross, "but on condition that you take yourself off now. I feel that I need guidance from above and your presence here——"

Marketer vented a little of his disdain in a coarse ejaculation.

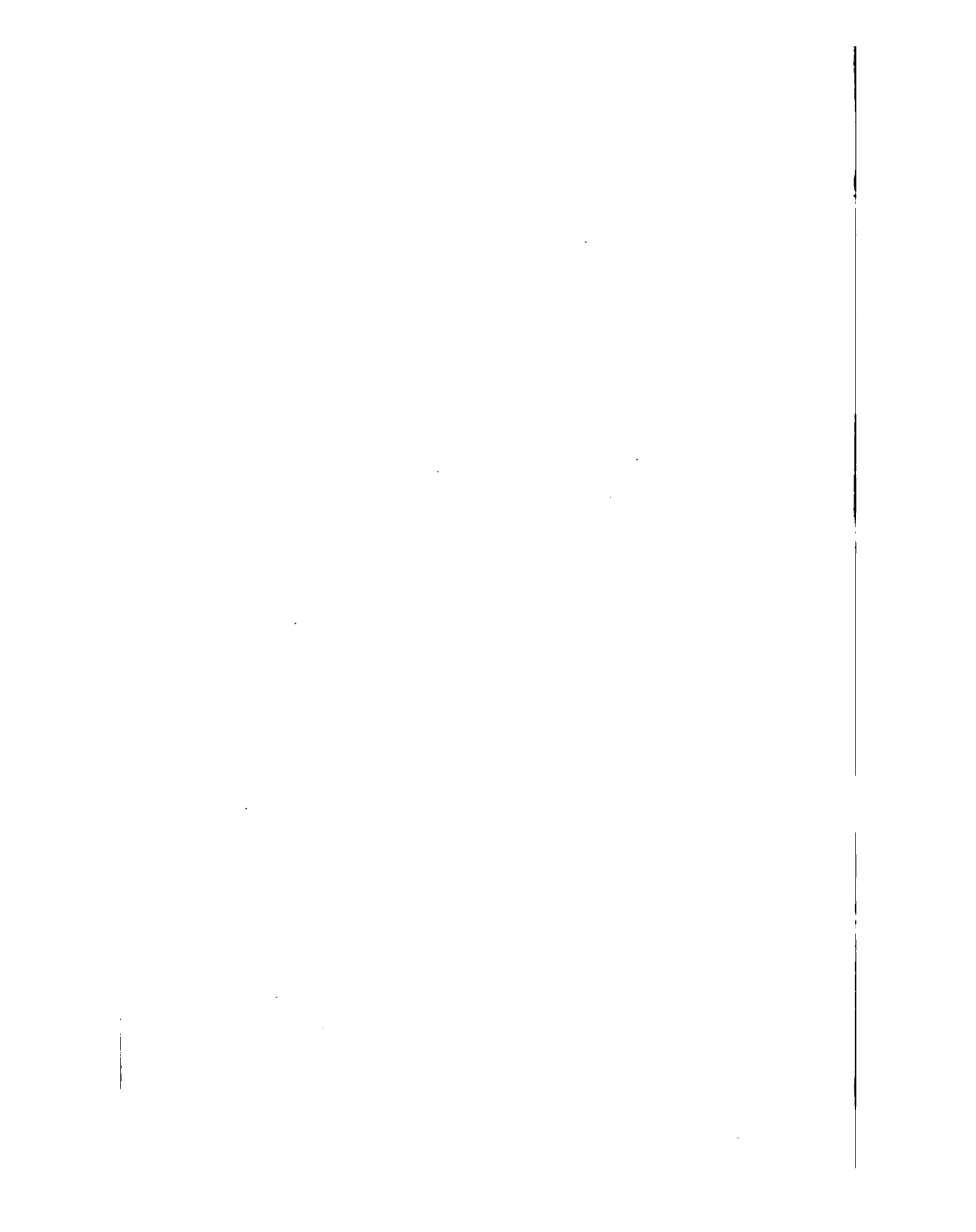
"I will talk with the child," said Cowcross. "I will point out his duty to him." He lowered his voice. "I will do so much for old sakes' sake; and because I fancy I see in him a possible means to your own redemption. The influence——"

"O, cut that fake," cried Marketer.

He brooded awhile with dull eyes, plainly



**Marketer, stupidly incensed . . . flourished his fist in
the cobbler-preacher's face**



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conscious that he stood defeated. Then he laughed, very drearily.

"Fuss about the tenderlin'," he said at length. "Not sure I want him at all, I ain't. Ah!" he added, quickly, fiercely, "but I'll 'ave him, if I 'ave to take him away one limb at a time." He walked slowly toward the door. "I s'pose," he said, peevishly, "I 'ad better leave him to you for a bit, as he don't seem as much in love wi' me as I 'ad 'oped he would. But you bring him round to-night, mind!" He returned again to the counter, forcing a wavering smile that had a touch of pathos in it. His lips quivered in their bushy setting as he once more addressed his cowering son. "Think I was goin' to 'urt you, cock?" he asked with a strained air of heartiness. "Not me. You ain't my weight, yet." The boy did not respond to this overture. "You be good," said Marketer, "an' mind what I say, an' leave off prayin' for me—that's cheek, that is!—an' I'll take you to a circus or somewhere an' buy you a—a'oop or some'ing. See?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sir!" he exclaimed. "O, well. . . ."

He quitted the shop with a husky guffaw, abruptly.

SIXTH CHAPTER

REMINISCENT AND EMOTIONAL

MARKETER returned straightway to Slant Street.

“Soon back,” said Bill Fix, “but where’s the boy?”

“Comin’ on later.”

“’Ow did ’e take to you?”

Marketer dropped into a chair. “Didn’t take to me at all,” he replied, morosely.

“If I was you,” said Fix, “I should give him a miss.”

“If you was me you’d ’ave bowels.”

“What I mean to say is, what do you want to fret your fat over him at all for? Why not let Cowcross have him for keeps, as he’s so fond of him?”

“You give me a drop o’ the bane,” said Marketer; “an’ don’t be so ’andy wi’ your tongue.”

Fix placed a full bottle and a glass on the table.

“If I was you——” he ventured.

“If you was me you’d draw the cork. So draw it,” he stirred up the fire with his boot.

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“Bloomin’ place smells like a dead-’ouse,” he remarked amiably. “Bin murderin’ anybody lately?” He filled his glass, drained it, and re-filled it. “Three days is a long time,” he reflected aloud. “This stuff fair turned my belly when I first come out. Now——” He advanced his hand toward the reeking liquor.

“I should go a bit easy with it, though, Chick,” Fix said, timidly.

“What for?”

“It was that got you lagged before.”

“I don’t care if it was,” said Marketer. “It puts ’eart in me.”

“All very nice. But it ain’t the tack to do graft on.”

“Graft?”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

“O, yes, I know,” growled Marketer. “But I ain’t so sure as I shan’t run straight in future. I dessay I could easy get a job, if I sucked up to some sky-pilot or some society for genteel ticketers.”

“Like you did to Cowcross?”

Marketer grinned.

“You know as well as another man, Chick,” continued Fix, argumentatively, “that you never could stand that there rabbity life. It’d be like joining a Sunday School class. You’d jack it up afore you drew your fust week’s pay.”

“I dunno.”

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“ No bunce. No excitement. Bell to ring you to bed. Bell to ring you up of a mornin’. Bell for prayers. Bell for breakfast an’ dinner an’ tea. Ringin’ to the glory o’ the land all day. An’ no lotion. Coffee an’ cake. Tea-meetin’s an’ magic lanterns. Ole women—male an’ female—tyin’ bits o’ blue ribbon all over you an’ arstin’ after your soul. G-r-r-r! I can see you at it. ‘ Please, ma’am, may I speak to Tommy Smith, he’s stuck a pin into my leg.’ ‘ Oldin’ up your ‘ and.” He laughed scornfully. “ O, perish me pink! Chick Marketer doin’ o’ them tricks! Chick, the ole Gun o’ Little ‘Ell! Not ‘alf I can’t see you at it.”

“ Little ‘Ell! Gone now, I s’pose? ” mused Marketer.

Fix nodded sadly. “ Good riddance they will call it,” he replied. “ But I dunno. What a gorgeous crowd they was after all! ” he went on with kindling eyes. “ What a big-fisted, light-fingered crowd! How they could put up the dooks! An’ never a man among ‘em but would parker with his last deaner to buy a pal some tommy! Gonophs!—yes. Never doin’ no honest work out o’ quod from the time when they was in not much frocks an’ nickin’ the baby’s milk to when their poor ole shakin’ legs got them lagged on the kinchin lay. Remember, Chick, ‘ow they used to tumble out when the tiggies made a raid for a ‘ot poge-hunter or snidesman

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—comin' quickfoot to the doors in droves, 'angin' out o' the winders, droppin' flower pots accidental from the roof—cosh! An' oh, the day when they outed the copper's nark! Bits of him all up an' down the ain't-it-a-treat as fur as the ole 'Glue Pot.' An' all the bloomin', yowlin' pack a treadin' on his naked heels right into the 'Igh Street. 'Ow they yelped! I can 'ear the roar of it now, Chick."

Marketer glowed. For he could hear the roar, too, and the scene out of which it arose. A summer night—hot, unrestful, full of threatenings of thunder, with lightning playing about the broken chimney-pots, and the torn clouds luminously red. A hush in the air. At quick, monotonous intervals the wailing voice of a babe splitting the murmurous silence shrilly, or a drunkard on the stones, growling out curses at a passer-by. From afar, as it seemed— from the near tramway in reality—the sounds of endless footsteps, whirling wheels, and strident cries of hawkers, coming fitfully, dully, to aching senses, an added aggravation of the quivering heat throbs, forbidding ease of mind or limb. Little Hell supinely wakeful. In the houses, disease; in the street, a rampant longing for cool dreams. And permeating all insidiously, the prompting that urges men to sin for sin's sake, the thirst for violence, rapine, horror. Then a mutter of thunder, dwindling to the distance, and fading

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away in a breath of warm, strong wind. After that, silence—absolute, terrible. And into the silence an embodied cry of fear, belched up, as it seemed, from the very mouth of nether Hell, to fall headlong among the startled inhabitants, scattering panic. A moment of pause, in which a creeping whisper goes about, and faces appear, haggard and wondering, at the black doorways. Then a second cry, recognisably human. The whisper swelling to a hoarse growl like an echo of the storm that broods above. Men running along the pavement with their unbuckled belts swinging in their hands, and their eyes and tongues engaged in eager questioning. The cry again. And, suddenly, a rending yell of fury, filling the streets and soaring up to the resplendent sky. “A nark! a nark!” Turning the corner in a clattering helter-skelter—reeling, rolling, rising, falling, now spread across the road from house to house, and washing up like the sea, now contracted and long-drawn-out like a penned-up river—a mob of infuriate men, with one desperate craven human alone in its midst, screaming hoarsely, fighting, beseeching, praying for its worthless life. “A nark!” The cry sweeps by, and after it the wild Alsations go fighting on, until the waiting storm breaks in a crash that shakes the world, swamping the little human tumult below. Then the rain comes down with a liquid rush, pattering on the stream-

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ing stones, and the spoilers creep back, vermin-like, to their frowsy lairs.

A picture far from alluring to the law-abiding Philistine, with his chest-protector and his bed-socks. But to the lawless Marketer a vision of old delight.

"Ah, by my cadaver!" he cried, bringing his fist down hard on the table. "But they was good boys, Bill!"

"Good boys!"

"*'Always be rough politely,'* was their motto."

"So it was; so it was," breathed Fix, beaming.

As they chopped reminiscences thus, Marketer shook off his gloom. The afternoon passed. The light waned. Bill Fix lit the lamp and banked up the fire. The brandy sank low in the bottle.

At about six o'clock some one pushed open the shop-door.

"Ha'p'orth o' bulls' eyes, Bill," said Marketer. "'Urry out, ole Skin-an'-grief."

But it was Judith who had entered. Fix remarked at a first glance that she seemed agitated. She stood fumbling at the hem of her jacket. At his surprised "'Ullo, Judy!" she uttered a thin, tinkling laugh.

"Jest dropped in, Bill," she said, with a poor assumption of carelessness.

"What for?"

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The question seemed to embarrass her. "O, I was passin'," she said.

"You look a bit funny, some'ow."

"If I look as funny as you, you ought to be laughin' yourself to death."

She wandered aimlessly about the shop, swinging a small bag recklessly.

"Jest in time to make us some tea," hinted Fix.

"I can't stop," she said. "Jest dropped in, that's all."

Now it is not customary in that state of life to make calls of ceremony. Bill stared at her, puzzled. A horrid dread that she had come to borrow some money assailed him.

"Must ha' called about some'ing," he said.

"No, I never," was the tart reply. "Can't anybody call?"

"O-ah!" said Fix. "An' now you're 'ere come in an' set down an' make your miserable life 'appy." He jerked his thumb toward the parlour. "Only Chick in there."

"No idea *he'd* be in," said the girl.

"Where else would he be?"

"Up the pole—where the flag flies—for all I know or care," she said testily.

"Well, come in. You fair gi' me the gripes standin' fidgettin' about like that. Wust o' bein' such a ladies' man!" he grumbled, humourously.

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"No, I think I'll be off," said Judith, moving slowly, very slowly, toward the door.

Just then Marketer, growing impatient, joined them.

"'Ullo, Judy! An' 'ow's the ole complaint?" he greeted her, boisterously.

She stamped her foot. "Don't you call me Judy," she snapped.

He laughed. "All right, my pretty ginger-cake. Ain't she hot, Bill?"

"You leave me alone," she exclaimed.

"Me! Why, I'm jest beginnin' to like you."

"I'm not comin' in," she announced to Fix.

"Stop out, then," said Marketer.

An underlying greyness dulled the natural pallor of her skin. "You ain't the boss 'ere," she retorted. "If Bill asks me to come in, I'll come in. Not else."

"What's all the fuss?" cried Fix. "Ain't I arst you already? Makin' all this how-de-do as if you was a real lady."

"Pickles!" she said elegantly, and swept into the little parlour with her nose high in the air. But, when she had sat down, and they were chaffing her, she seemed almost shy, Fix thought. Her foot tapped, tapped on the floor, and her hands wrought together in her lap, unceasingly.

Marketer poured out a fresh glassful of brandy.

"'Ave a go?" he asked Judith.

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"Thank you for nothing," she said. "The smell's enough."

"Please yourself. All the more for me."

"Is he drunk, Bill?" inquired Judith, in that provocative, matter-of-fact tone which women are so expert in the use of, when they wish to be grossly insolent.

Marketer set down his glass. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

She laughed pleasantly and ignored him.

"When's he goin' to do something for his livin', Bill?" was her next assault.

"Look 'ere, young Nose-an'-chin," thundered Marketer. "I don't want none o' your ikey little ways. So cheese it—see! Don't come it. Or I'll 'ave to use a cane to you."

She tittered. "Dear me!"

"In the vulgar," said Marketer, "I shall 'ave to put it on you. On'y one 'alf looper an' you wouldn't be worth dressin'."

Bill Fix, watching her keenly, saw that she trembled violently as Marketer threatened her. Not with fear, the old man reflected: Judith was not that kind of girl. A plague on these blustering ways with women that mastered them and won them! Bill Fix foresaw undesirable complications ahead.

The girl got up and busied herself in preparing the evening meal. She was in the midst of making tea when the shop-door opened once

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more. At the sound of the cracked bell she started, and a stream of boiling water from the kettle poured down, hissing, on the hot fender.

"Who is it?" she whispered, clutching Fix's arm.

Fix peered over the curtain. "Only ole Cowcross."

"I say," she panted, hoarsely. "He—he mustn't see me 'ere. Don't tell him I've bin. You won't, Chick? I'm goin' to hide out at the back. You won't breathe a word, either of you?"

She fled with a flourish of skirts from the room.

Cowcross rapped on the glass panel of the door of communication, and entered, holding Deuce by the hand.

The boy had been crying. His eyelids were swollen and purple, his lips were loose and tremulous, tears had reddened his nose and cheeks.

"Brought him along, 'ave you?" said Marketer. "Well, sonny?" He held out his hands in invitation; but Deuce kept close to Cowcross. "What's the matter with him, Peter? What's upset him?" he asked. "Come, Deuce, tell us."

"Go to your father," Cowcross urged.

The boy obeyed reluctantly.

Marketer took him between his knees and smoothed back the hair from his forehead.

"Ain't frightened o' me, are you?"

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Deuce replied, "No, sir."

"'No, father,' you should say . . . Well, an' where shall I take you to-night?" he asked, with clumsy tenderness. "Madame Toosaud's? Theayter?"

A sob rived the boy's labouring chest. Marketer pushed him away, impatiently.

Cowcross, watching closely, foresaw the impending storm of invective hovering on the father's lips. "Deuce is not quite used to the change yet, Chick," he interposed. "He was so attached to me, you see. He feels the parting acutely. But I have pointed out his duty to him, and I have every hope he will do it."

"It'll be a rough 'ouse if he don't."

Cowcross looked troubled. "I think I will go now," he said.

"No," the boy cried out. "Don't leave me 'ere, dad."

He would have escaped to his old guardian, but his father gripped him by the wrist.

"Ah, don't hurt him," pleaded Cowcross.

"Who's 'urtin' him?" said Marketer indignantly. "Kid wouldn't go on like this if you 'adn't never plumbd him up wi' rotten lies about me."

Cowcross smiled tolerantly, in a way that heated Marketer's blood. "I cannot, it seems, talk to you," he said, "but I can forgive you."

"Go an' scrape yourself."

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"And pray for you."

"Pray for the price of a 'air-cut first. Pray for me! Pray for a clean mouth without no train-oil in it. An', look 'ere . . ." He rose from his seat. "If ever I find you speakin' to my boy in the street, or waylayin' him, or tamperin' with him in any way, I'll put a Sunday-mornin' face on you that'll make your breakfast 'urt you. See?"

Here Deuce slipped from his father's relaxed clutch and ran to Cowcross, clasping him about the waist. Marketer, swearing volubly, started in pursuit, seized the boy, dragged him from his hold, and flung him into a further corner of the room. There he cowered, half stunned.

"Steady on, Chick," cried Fix, going to the boy's aid.

Marketer stood immovable, plainly wroth with himself.

Then Cowcross spoke. "Listen to me," he said sternly, "a father's privileges, Marketer, extend only so far as they comprise the care and protection of his offspring. There are, I may tell you, organised societies which have the power, not only to take away a child from his parent, but also to punish the parent heavily. Your record is not in your favour should you be prosecuted. I think the law would not be very lenient toward you. Therefore, my old friend, let me warn you now, that I'll put justice on your

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trail as certainly as there is a God, if the boy comes to harm by you."

"Wow!—wow!—wow!" mouthed Marketer. "What d'you think I care for your mag?"

"Possibly as little as you care for the boy," returned Cowcross. "But there is a power. . . . Christ has ever a ready ear for the crying silence of children."

"Get out of it," said Marketer scornfully, "fore I forget you ain't a man."

Cowcross smiled his genial smile, that yet, in certain circumstances (as now) had such a might of aggravation.

"God bless you, Marketer," he murmured. That was all.

SEVENTH CHAPTER

JUDITH BEGINS TO DISCOVER HERSELF

WHEN Cowcross had departed, Judith came stealing back into the room.

"All gay, I see," she said, with a sigh of relief. Then she espied the boy. "'Ullo, my peach-bloom sonny! What are you doin' 'ere?"

He gave a glad cry at sight of her, ran to her and clasped her two hands. Marketer looked on moodily.

"Come out for a walk with your old pal, Deuce?" she said.

"O—ah!" he answered eagerly.

"No, he won't then," said Marketer.

"Why not?"

"'Cos he's comin' out wi' me. I'm goin' to take him to a theayter, as I promised. I'm fair sick o' stickin' 'ere in this mouldy 'ole. I'm all cobwebs, like as if I'd bin runnin' up agin some o' the unemployed. You can come as well, if you like,—an' can be civil for a bit," he added.

She flushed, as she bent over the boy. "Not me," she said.

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"Risk it an' come," said he, almost in entreaty. "What's the good o' playin' the 'oly angel wi' me? An' you can look after the boy if I get drunk."

"Would you like me to come, Deuce?" she asked him, as if carelessly.

"Do come," he said.

"But, mind you, Chick," said she, "I pay for my whack."

"Pay or toss, as you like," he laughed. "Tain't a question o' posh wi' me. I got a brightful."

"Well, I will come. To look after the boy."

"P'r'aps you'd better sit wi' your back to the stage, in case your dial puts the actors out," he sneered.

"Funny father you got," she remarked to Deuce.

Half an hour later they left the house, Deuce holding a hand of each. Marketer's robust methods secured them a seat in the front row of the balcony.

"We'll let him sit between us," said Judith as they settled themselves.

"He can stand on 'is 'ead if you'd prefer it."

The play was a crude, high-flavoured melodrama in five long acts and a score of scenes, some of which, however, played many parts. They were soon under the thrall of the plot. Deuce, intensely excited, rose and stood, craning

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his body over the edge of the gallery. Judith, scarcely less excited, leaned forward too, with parted lips.

Suddenly she felt a hand touch her skirt near her knees. She drew back hastily into her seat and saw that Marketer had taken advantage of the boy's change of posture to sidle along toward her. It was his hand that now lay in her lap. She narrowly examined his face, on which the dim lustre of the lower gas-globes was throwing upward shadows. He seemed wholly engrossed in the mimic world unfolded before him on the stage; and she let his hand rest where it had strayed.

At the end of the first act he left them to visit the bar. He brought back sweetmeats and cakes for her and Deuce.

The second act began.

It had not long been in progress before she felt the touch of his hand again. She gazed down at it as it lay there limply, plain against the dark background of her dress, big, hairy, muscular. She advanced her own hand toward it, fearfully. There could be no doubt now that he was conscious of what he was doing. And she ought, of course, to fling it away indignantly. But she did not.

No word passed between them during the conduct of the play; and the intervals he invariably spent in the bar, staying there till the

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bell rang for the curtain to rise. Then, as soon as the lights were lowered, his hand would creep back again, and she would permit it to lie on her lap without protest. The touch of his hand thrilled her to the core of her body. She felt a delicious liquid warmth coursing through her veins. A sense of drowsy ecstasy enwrapped her. At last, in the final act of all, she could no longer resist the longing that beset her to touch his flesh with at least the tips of her fingers. He gripped them at once and held them fast. She made no effort to draw them away. A sigh fluttered her loose blouse, and all her vaunted self-sufficiency flitted away on the wind of it.

Then the curtain fell on the last scene of all, and they drifted into the sloppy, black streets.

Now she put the boy between her and the man, resolutely. Her heart was beating almost painfully, yet had she never felt such tumultuous gladness as filled it to overflowing then. She looked at Marketer as at a strange, new man. He was whistling as he strode along with his big blue overcoat unbuttoned, flapping in the swinging breeze. Deuce, his face flushed, was silently reviewing the wonders he had just beheld—beheld for the first time in his life.

“Let’s go an’ get a sandwich an’ a glass o’ beer somewhere,” said Marketer. “I could

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do wi' a gargle myself, an' I dessay you wouldn't say 'No' to a glass o' stout, Judy."

"I think—I would rather not," she faltered.

"Polly wouldn't but Mary would!" he chanted mischievously, and he turned his full, dark eyes on her with a smile of such unlooked-for good humour that Deuce began to hope that some day he might not hate his father. "No mistake about your bein' a woman, Judy, now."

He led them into a garish bar, inordinately crowded and damply, foetidly hot. They sat down, at his command, at a small round table, and he brought them sandwiches and beer, towering up before them, overpoweringly, talking blithely, whilst he ate and drank.

Deuce began to nod on the plush seat.

"'Old up, young un," said Marketer, staying him gently from toppling forward.

"Let's go," said Judith. "It's nearly twelve o'clock. Must be. I'll get the key o' the street if I don't mark it."

At the door of Bill Fix's house, shuttered up and dark and forbidding, they paused for a moment to exchange farewells.

"Good-bye, dear," said Judith, stooping down and kissing Deuce.

"Serve us all alike," said Marketer.

She glanced up at him swiftly with an expression of resentful reproach on her pale face.

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She felt as if he were profaning their dear, wicked secret by his flippancy.

"Well, good-night," said he. "Sure you can get in all right?"

"Of course."

"Bill'd put you up, I dessay . . ."

"I've got a latch-key." She produced it.

"Tell you what. I'll see you home."

"Not much, you won't."

"I forgot," said he. "You're goin' to be married soon."

"Cruel!" she gasped, swerving suddenly aside as if he had struck her with his fist. "Chick!"

He smiled, banteringly, exulting in this her first admission of his power over her. Already he was privileged to hurt her. He bent forward. "I'll see you in the mornin'," he whispered. "If you're good."

She said "Good-bye!" in a lingering undertone; then turned abruptly from him, and scuttled away up the street.

Outside her door she discerned the motionless figure of a man whom she instantly recognised as Cowcross. She had a feeling of intense panic. She stopped. But he had seen her and was coming toward her.

"Where have you been, Judith?" he asked her.

His look was grievous. Something of dignity

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seemed to have gone out of him. But the pathetic spectacle he presented as he drooped before her in his long, ill-fitting coat, with his unkempt hair and beard blowing grotesquely about his ears, moved her not to pity, but to a very poignant repulsion that included in its comprehensiveness his whole appearance, his voice, his pose, the size and shape of his ears, the frayed edges of his cuffs, his crumpled collar. She had much ado to keep from showing openly her disgust at the sight of him. Her voice rang harshly as she replied: "Me! Nowhere!"

"I have been waiting here for you ever since half-past seven," said he.

"I bin for a walk. To see a girl friend," she said, yawning obtrusively.

"But—" he stared at her solemn—"the Meeting."

"Didn't feel up to it," was her brusque explanation. "Don't matter missin' it once in a way. Now I must go in."

Her tone astonished him so that he could not find words to answer her; but stood searching her face as if to find the truth it masked.

"Judith," he said at last, sternly. "You must tell me where you have spent this evening. You are flushed. You have been partaking——"

There was nothing left for her, then, but to take refuge in her femininity. "'Ow dare you insinuate such a thing, Mister Cowcross?" she

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exclaimed. She moved in the direction of the door; but he barred the way. "Permit me to pass!" she said, in haughty tones, inspired by the drama she had just witnessed.

"Not till you have satisfied me," he flashed. "Are you aware——?"

"I am not *aware*—as you call it—that you've got any right to keep me out 'ere 'alf the night. You're not my ole man yet, y'know."

He passed his hand slowly across his forehead. "You're not yourself."

"Yes, I am, thank you."

He seemed as if dazed. "But you promised, if I called for you——"

"I'm cold," she said, "let me go indoors."

She pushed past him rudely.

"Ah, my dear!" he cried out.

Her key was now in the door. She opened it, slipped into the dark passage and closed it on him with a loud slam, leaving him there alone.

For a moment he looked as if he would batter on the hard wood with his clenched hands. Shadows of sleeping passions, stirring into life again after their long quiescence, darkened his mind and distorted his face. He gazed up at the sheer, black front of the house, thence to the clouded sky above, nocturnally blue. Then his arms dropped to his sides. He turned and walked slowly back to his lonely home—empty now, drearily empty.

EIGHTH CHAPTER

THE FLIGHT OF DEUCE

THREE days passed. Three days fraught with impending dole, with threats of tragedy, and a promise of a bright beyond.

Deuce sat in the Slant Street parlour, listlessly turning the pages of one of Fix's books. Fix himself was poring over a bulky ledger scribbled closely from end to end with figures. It looked a dry record ; but it was plain that the old receiver found it of surpassing interest, for he chuckled ever and again as his rheumy eyes travelled down the close-packed columns, and rubbed his lean, dry hands together underneath the table. This volume, indeed, was a book of chronicles. In it was written the whole history of his nefarious life—not in plain words, for any to read, but in involved calculations of profits to which he alone held the clue. He had prospered. There was a safe cunningly hidden in that frowsy old house. Lately, it is true, business had been provokingly slack. Many of those who had helped him to his wealth were dead

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or lay within the walls of gaols, rotting in vile durance. But Marketer, the greatest of all those who had served him, was free again, a ready instrument. It pleased Fix that Marketer should be ruffing it: the more fully he tasted of those delights such as his soul loved, the keener would grow his zest for them. A little while, and the screw must be put on. Money must become gradually rarer until the trickle from his pocket to Marketer's ceased altogether. Then the time would arrive for Fix to suggest, to cozen, even to threaten. He had a score of promising schemes heavy with golden fruit that Marketer must pluck for him to enjoy.

"A few more days. A little more license!" he said within himself. "And then . . . He's awkward to manage. But I know him. And I can do it." He raised his eyes from the ledger and peered across the table at Deuce. The boy was pale and woebegone.

"He's a brute!" thought Fix, who had his share of tenderness, who was indeed as sentimental a man as you would find anywhere. "I say, Deuce," he uttered aloud, "ain't you feelin' well?"

The boy looked up. A dry sob shook him.

"'Ow would some fried fish go?" asked Fix. "Will you fetch it? Tuppenny middle bits. Four pieces. An' a penn'orth o' spuds."

"I don't think I'm hungry," said Deuce.

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“ Ah, but wait till you smell the jipper. An’ ’ow about me, I’m ’ungry enough.”

Deuce picked up his cap. Fix gave him a shilling and he departed on his errand.

He had scarce left the house when Marketer came striding through the shop, kicked open the door, and entered, rather unsteadily. He had shaved the hair from his face, and now looked surprisingly young. He was flushed and hurried of manner. He flung his hat wildly down and passed his fingers through his hair.

“ Cheer-oh, ole hunks ! ” he saluted Fix. Then he gazed about the room. “ Where’s the boy ? Gone to bed ? ”

“ I sent him out for some fish.”

Marketer sat down, heavily. “ Frightful ’sponsibility that boy,” he said. “ Don’t know what to do wi’ him, quite.”

“ Might start by bein’ kind to him,” Fix remarked.

“ Kind to him ! Well, ain’t I kind ? Kind as I can be to a snivellin’ young whelp what’s ’ad his mind poisoned agin me. ’Ow can a man be kind to a kid that’s always startin’ away an’ flinchin’ as if I’d brought him up on snakes.”

“ You frighten him. You’re so rough. You can’t keep your temper.”

“ I know I’m me. What o’ that ? He’s young enough to alter himself. I ain’t. ’Owever, it don’t matter. I dessay he’ll get used to me in

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time." He lit his pipe. "I say, Bill," he said, after a pause. "About young Judy."

Fix picked up his ledger and placed it on the sideboard. "Well?"

"It's a bit of a barney about her."

"What is?"

"You know." He winked and leered.

"Playin' the goat, you are," said Fix. "An' you ain't young enough to do it pretty. Come to that, what you want to go messin' about wi' the gel at all for?"

Marketer swaggered in his chair, rolling his big body from side to side. "She ain't a bad bit o' goods," said he.

"Not yet, she ain't."

"An' nuts on me, y'know. Fair!"

"Look how you lush her," said Fix, meaningly.

"Tain't that," said Marketer. "Matter o' fact it's as much as I can do to get her to let me stand her 'alf a pint o' beer."

Fix gave him a shrewd glance. "What about Cowcross?"

"Dropped out, 'e 'as."

"Ain't she goin' to marry him, then?"

"I dunno. P'r'aps she might. When I done with her." He grinned. "She's give him the slip three days runnin'."

"Ain't he bin round to her place?"

"Always round there. But he don't never

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catch her some'ow. 'Cos why? She's out along o' me."

"There ain't a word for the kind o' fool y'are, Chick."

"Not so much of it," said Marketer, irately. "What d'you mean? Comin' the 'oly father over me. I'll do as I brasted well like. I'm on my ticket. I kep' straight. *You* can't touch me."

"No?"

"No."

"P'r'aps I can't. An' p'r'aps you can't touch my money if I put the bar up."

"Got the 'ackles on, ain't you, Bill?" said Marketer, more mildly.

"If you think," said Fix, "as I'm goin' to keep on shellin' out the iron for you to chuck it away on that there gel—a gel I like, mindjer, an' don't want to see bought up by you—if you think that, all I can say is, you never kep' your brains clear while you was in jovah."

"Ease your arm," growled Marketer. "You know me an' I know you, I reckon. If we can't couple up wi'out jibbin', I pass—that's all."

"I only want you to understand," said Fix, "that I ain't runnin' no charitable institutions—not jest yet."

"'Ave a wet on it."

He drew a bottle from his pocket and offered it to Fix.

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"No thanks."

"That's always you. Too blinkin' artful. Spit o' my hand! what I might ha' bin worth if it hadn't bin for this cursed stuff—bless it!"

The liquor gurgled down his throat. He rose from his chair, began to caper about the floor, and then to chant an old refrain, with this stirring chorus :

"O, won't you come up, come up ?
Won't you come up to Limerick ?
Won't you come up, come up, come up,
All the way to Limerick ?"

"Fine song!" he said, and set the neck of the bottle to his lips once more.

"You'll drink yourself into stir agin," said Fix, wholly disgusted. "Or drink yourself out o' the world altogether."

Soon Deuce returned, carrying a greasy paper parcel. The wind had whipped some colour into his cheeks; but on catching sight of his father he grew pale instantly.

"My son, lend me your ear," Marketer spluttered. "It's all right," he went on, as Deuce looked at him doubtfully, perceiving his condition, "I don't want to eat it. What the 'ell's the matter wi' you?"

"Gently, Chick, gently," said Fix.

"You go an' put your 'ead in a bag," said Marketer. "An' don't let it be a good bag, either—Commere!" He grasped the boy's

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jacket and jerked him backward. "Know why I called you Deuce? 'Cos you was Number Two. The ace died. You come next. An' you're the cheapest card in the pack. Charles Marketer is your monnicker, really. After me. I'm Charles Marketer an' all. Now ain't that a privilege, eh?"

"Yes."

"Gettin' quite intelligent. But you should say, 'Yes, father.' An' look 'ere, young feller-me-lad, I think I've heard you refer to a certain person once or twice as 'dad.' Now that's wrong, y'know. I'm all the dad you got at present. An' I'll trouble you to bear that in mind. The stinkin' ole devil-dodger what you call by that there sacred name ain't got no more right to use it 'n a woman 'as to whistle. 'E's a dirty, lyin'——"

The boy flushed. "He's not."

"Come agin."

"If you mean my ole dad, he's nothing o' the kind."

"I don't mean your dad. Never talk about myself. I mean that there bit o' 'igh meat known as Pinky Cowcross."

The boy replied with spirit, "He's always bin good to me."

"O, 'as he?" mimicked Marketer. "Like to go back to him, I s'pose?" He quitted his seat. "If you mean to go back I . . . I wouldn't do

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much to you—no. But I'd put it on him, I would, till his 'ead looked like a bloody sponge. I'd made cold meat of him. I'd rip——”

Deuce stood, very stiff and erect. His mouth was shaped bitterly. His brows were drawn together in a sullen frown. At that moment he was very like his father. Bill Fix, from behind Marketer's chair, shook his forefinger warningly.

“I don't care,” said Deuce, defiantly, speaking over his father's head. “I ain't goin' to ruck on dad.”

“If you call him 'dad' agin, I'll knock you down,” roared Marketer, his fatal cholera mastering him as usual. “Ain't I forbid it?”

The boy's reply was a look of frank contempt. Then he turned his back on his father. But he had not been a guppersnipe all his life to no purpose. He had wheeled about an instant later, as Marketer rose, overturning his chair. He saw the heavy fist raised to strike him, ran in to dodge the blow, and seized his father round the waist. The shock of their collision was so sudden and violent that the man, forced half a pace backward, stumbled over his fallen chair and fell, dragging the boy down with him. Bill Fix snatched Deuce away in time to save him from receiving a swinging right-handed hit that would assuredly have cracked his skull.

“Step!” he cried in the boy's ear. “Go to

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Cowcross's. Anywhere. But lively! He'll murder you for this." Deuce hesitated. "Get out of it. I'll see to your father."

He stooped over the blaspheming figure on the floor. Between drunkenness and the shattering effect of the fall on his heavy body, Marketer was making spasmodic attempts to regain his feet, but only succeeding in smashing the chair to splinters in his wild struggles.

On that spectacle Deuce cast a last glance as he fled from the room, through the shop, out into the street. He was literally scared for his life. He had evolved—in part, perhaps, from Cowcross's talk, but mainly from the gossip of the streets, and more recently from his three days' experience of a personal association—such a terrible conception of his father that he fully believed him capable of murder. Indeed, it had been hinted to him, in vague terms now grown luridly significant, that more than a suspicion of having killed his man attached to the evil name of Marketer. Thus it was not surprising that fear lent wings to his heels. He did not slacken in his headlong flight until he turned the corner of Parker Crescent.

But he found the cobbler's shop in darkness. It was, as yet, barely ten o'clock; too early for Cowcross to have gone to bed. He rapped on the door with a forlorn hope that his old guardian might have put out the lights and retired to the

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inner room ; but there was no response to his knocking. He hunkered down on the wooden step then, and waited.

It was very cold and damp in that place. His body was moist and hot. He began to shiver. Half an hour passed and still Cowcross did not come. He got up stiffly upon his feet and trotted briskly up and down.

A thought was forming in his mind which frightened him by its insistence. He tried to dismiss it, but could not. The thought was that he had done wrong in returning to Cowcross.

As yet we have seen Deuce only as a boy prone to weeping, afraid, full of tremors. But that was not his normal character. Two factors have gone to that necessarily unsatisfactory presentment of him : fear of his father and grief at the parting from Cowcross. He was a child of a lively imagination, a child apt to conjure up terrifying visions more deadly to his courage than actual, tangible dangers. He had felt lonely, as only a child may, in the new, strange surroundings to which he had been so unceremoniously transplanted. He abhorred his father. The dull monotony of the last three days had preyed upon his vitality. Seeing no plain future before him beyond a stagnation of years in that dreary Slant Street house, he had been as one without hope. His chronic melancholy was a disposition as foreign to him as oil to water. Then he had

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an intensely loving temperament. He was loyal, too, transferring his affections slowly and never from motives of self-interest. His deep fondness for and veneration of Cowcross are, after all, not hard to explain ; for the old man had always been wholly kind to him and gentle, despite the fierceness of his religious creed that vented itself in his public utterances. The cobbler belonged, indeed, to the not uncommon type of fanatic that expends all its bitterness in the cause of Heaven, and all its sweetness in the earthly life. And it was a consideration of these things that moved Deuce to distracting thoughts as he paced the gleaming pavement of the darkling street.

If he quartered himself again on Cowcross what would happen ? His father would surely discover him, and then there would be red war between the two men. He recalled his father's horrific threats, and had a sick pang at the heart. His father would kill Cowcross ; at least, he would cruelly mishandle him. And in the end Deuce would be haled back ignominiously to that detestable custody he had just escaped from, having only harmed his good protector and availed himself nothing.

But, on the other hand, he could not go back to his father. On that he was resolved. There was an alternative course, a hard one, but he must take it. He must run away—he knew not

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whither—and obliterate himself, trusting to the God who cared for the sparrows to provide for him also.

Having come to this decision, he pulled his cap down over his eyes, and, with a stiff lip, strode away. But he did wish it was not already night and autumn. So much more confidently could he have cast himself upon the mercy of the world had it been a golden dayspring with the summer beckoning him.

NINTH CHAPTER

IN AN OLD MAID'S PARLOUR

LEAVE we now the dolours and squalors of the New Cut and that neighbourhood for the trim-built villas and peaceful pleasaunces of a certain well-reputed district in the north-west of London. There, a few days later, in a neat small house, severely residential of aspect, sat Miss Ivy Porch playing "Patience."

She played this game with cards by her lonely fireside, as she had played it all her life in another way. For Miss Ivy was growing old. Her birthdays were becoming an annual embarrassment. She was thin and rather sallow. Her hair was scanty and grey. She had a spare, graceless figure, knuckly fingers and broad, flat feet. With deft, practised hands she shuffled and sorted out the cards, laying them in a long row on the big baize-covered table. Hearts. The Queen. She had once been a queen of hearts herself—for a brief while, and in timid fashion. That was when roses bloomed in her cheeks and her form was plump and rounded. But

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there had come no King to mate with her. No King, but a simpering Knave, who, by the novice, is so often mistaken for the King. She lays him down and draws yet another card. There is a run on hearts to-night. This is the Ace of that suit—a lonely heart, her own, in the midst of a colourless expanse.

The kettle on the hob and the cat on the hearth-rug purr together in soothing unison. From a cage on the cumbersome mahogany sideboard comes the drowsy twitter of an aged linnet. The light in the room is failing. She can scarce see the colour of the pips now. She glances toward the bay window, down which the rain-drops trickle fast. Without is a weeping desolation of dripping shrubs and gleaming tiles, reflecting fantastic chimney-stacks. The sky is a marbled wrack of clouds, tinted a pallid blue in the gloaming. A steaming mist that is formed of ghosts rises from the sodden soil.

Miss Ivy collects the cards, slips them into a leathern case, and places them on the mantel-piece.

She takes the "curate" poker—a black, twisted thing—from its hiding place behind the coal-box and stirs the red embers gently. The brass fire-irons that adorn the fender are never turned to such base uses. She lights the gas, and pulls down the blind, half way.

She does not pull it right down, because in the bay of the window there is a little table, and on

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this table stands a tall silk hat. It has stood there for nearly fifteen years, but not idly. Indeed, no ! Miss Ivy placed it there herself to the end that evilly-disposed persons, espying it from the street, might be deluded into the belief that there was always a man in the house, and so be daunted. The hat cost Miss Ivy half-a-crown to an old Jew-man : and she reckons it good value. She takes it up now and brushes it carefully.

She spreads a cloth on the table and proceeds to set out the tea-things. She is dipping into a caddy when she hears the sound of a dog's bark. It is hoarse and weak, and trails off into a despairing whine.

“ How very peculiar ! ” says Miss Ivy.

Her mind fleets the cream of memory. It was on just such a night as this, and she was making tea then even as she is making it now, when—to complete the coincidence—she heard a dog bark in the same pitiful, helpless way. She had gone out and found a grimy wet cur cowering on her doorstep. And she had driven it off. For in those days she was young enough not to have lost hope of a husband, and so it had been incumbent on her to affect a dislike of animals, it being well known that a love of the smaller domestic pets inevitably foreshadows the doom of perpetual maidenhood.

It had caused her a pang to be so harsh ; but

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that was nothing to the pang she suffered on the following day, when, on issuing from her garden gate, she came upon the body of the poor little beast, cold and stiff in the gutter. She had vowed then that never again would she turn a stray thing from her door. The visible result was the cat on the hearthrug which had come mewling to her as a kitten, and the linnet in the cage on the sideboard that she had found, blown out of the parent nest, fluttering feebly in the road.

She went to the street door and peered out.

Lying prone on the wet flags was a ragged boy with a white dog standing beside him. At the sight of Miss Ivy the dog wagged its blunt stump of a tail and howled hopefully. Miss Ivy, trembling, stooped down and touched the boy. He did not move under the caress. She could see his face in profile. It was colourless and haggard, oldened by ravages of want and woe, pinched with hunger and chilled to a greyish pallor.

Miss Ivy yearned over the child. She raised his touzled head, supporting it in the crook of her arm, and thrust her bony hand into the breast of his shirt. His heart still beat. Assured of this she lifted him and bore him into her parlour, staggering. The dog followed at her heels, but, catching timely sight of the cat, paused on the threshold of the room.

Miss Ivy laid the boy down on the hearth-rug and began to chafe his hands. The firelight

IN AN OLD MAID'S PARLOUR

strayed over him, revealing his face more plainly. He looked to be about ten years old. He was dark and had good features. His feet and his head were alike bare. He wore a girl's jacket, trimmed with fur, and a tattered pair of knickerbockers, fastened about his middle by a knotted strand of rope.

Presently he stirred and opened his eyes. They were large grey eyes set in heavy purple lids. They had a luminous look of entreaty that changed first to bewilderment and then to fear.

"'Ere, you let me be," he gasped. "I ain't done nothing." He struggled into a sitting posture. "'Ere, who are you? Where's my dog? What you brought me 'ere for? Where's my dog?" These words he uttered in a stifled, wheezing voice. His gaze wandered from Miss Ivy's face to the appointments of the room. "Oy!" he muttered. "There's my dog. Come 'ere, Snuff."

The dog ambled stiffly toward him, still with a wary eye on the sleeping cat. The boy took it in his arms.

"Are you hungry?" asked Miss Ivy.

"Not 'alf, I ain't," said the boy.

"I'll get you something to eat. Do you like jam?"

"Not 'alf I don't."

"I'll make you a cup of tea, too, and then you

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must tell me who you are, and where you live, and all about yourself."

"I say, 'm," he ventured, after a perceptible pause, "if you got any odds an' ends o' anything—it don't matter what—I wish you'd give 'em to Snuff 'ere, 'fore you 'tend to me."

"Now I like you for that," beamed Miss Ivy. "What does your dog eat generally?"

"What he can get, 'm," was the reply. "Anything from flies to rats. 'E ain't partic'lar."

"But neither flies nor rats can be good for him, surely?"

"They all help to fill up, 'm," said the boy. "Great thing is to get filled up."

Miss Ivy gave the dog some scraps of meat, first putting the plate on an open newspaper to preserve her carpet from risk of defilement. The cat was aroused from her sleep by the sound of the dog's gnawing. She opened a drowsy eye and looked at the intruder.

"Billo!" exclaimed the boy hoarsely, "or there'll be a rare ole chermozzle."

Miss Ivy dropped the loaf she was carving just in time to seize the cat as it crouched on its haunches to spring.

"Dear, dear, dear!" she cried. "How very inhospitable of you, Bibi! Why, you naughty, naughty puss, don't you remember how you came straying to me in the rain just as this poor dog has done?"

IN AN OLD MAID'S PARLOUR

Miss Ivy's mincing speech and manner moved the boy to secret merriment. He winked and wriggled his shoulders.

Miss Ivy put the cat aside and returned to the table. She cut a thick slice of bread and jam and gave it to the boy. He took one large bite and then seemed struck suddenly motionless.

"Don't you like it?" asked Miss Ivy, puzzled.

He rolled his eyes up to her and gulped hard.

"Like it!" he said, still struggling with the wedge of unmasticated bread and breathing heavily. "Why, you put butter on it fust!"

"But you should not bolt your food," Miss Ivy expostulated. "You should chew it first."

"Yes, 'm?" interrogatively.

"Of course. It's very injurious to the health to allow anything to pass through the œsophagus into the stomach in a solid state. That is to say, I think it is called the œsophagus," added the conscientious lady. "Mr. Gladstone, you know, always chewed each morsel that passed his lips at least thirty-two times before he swallowed it."

"Did he though," said the boy, with a polite show of interest.

"He did, indeed," returned Miss Ivy. "And he was a great man."

She poured out a cup of tea and handed it down to the waif. Snuff, having by this time made an end of the scraps, crawled over to the hearth-rug

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and squatted there, close beside its small master, blinking with red-rimmed eyes at the fire.

"Now," said Miss Ivy, "you must tell me who you are and so on. First, what is your name?"

"Deuce Marketer," replied the boy.

"Were you christened—Deuce?"

"It's the name I always go by, 'm."

"Are your parents alive?"

Deuce hesitated. "No," he said, slowly.

"Both dead they are."

"O, dear!" twittered Miss Ivy. "How very sad! And how old are you?"

"Close on eleven."

"Where have you been living since your parents died?"

"Mostly in Parker Crescent."

"Where is that?"

"Slant Street way."

Miss Porch gave it up. "And what have you been doing? Who has looked after you?"

Deuce blinked up at her. "I've looked arter myself."

"But you have a home?"

"Not now I ain't."

"How is that?"

"I 'ad to 'op it."

"I don't understand."

"Bloke—pretends he's my father—wanted me to thief, 'm. Knocked me about 'cos I wouldn't. Name o' Chick Marketer." All this Deuce

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reeled off glibly enough. His own fear was lest he should be sent back to the unhappy life he had escaped from, and so he had prepared his story beforehand.

"But," said Miss Ivy, "still I do not understand. This man Marketer—You say your name is Marketer too. How do you know he is not your father?"

"I 'ate him so," said Deuce. "An' he's only just lately claimed me. Bin in quod, 'e 'as long's I remember."

"Been where?"

"In stir, 'm. In prison, y'know."

"And you have run away from him?"

"Yes 'm. An' a gay ole time I've 'ad of it."

"Tell me."

"It was three days ago, 'm. Fust night I slept in a greengrocer's van down a mews what I know. And, 'fore it was 'alf light, down comes one o' the 'orsekeepers and boots me out of it. It was rainin' an' all an' perishin' cold, an' I wanders about in the dark an' the slush till it was mornin'; an' then I goes into Regent's Park an' 'as a doss down by the canal. When I woke up it was still rainin,' an' this 'ere dog was snoozled up agin me. I was that 'ungry, I tell you, 'm, I could ha' eat him for breakfast, if there'd bin any meat on him. But there wasn't. So I goes an' sells my boots instead, an' gets a tanner on 'em.

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“Afternoon I prosses about in 'Ampstead. An' when it gets dark I hides in one o' them red arches where the pond is, back o' Parlyment 'Ill. It was a bit damp ; but I was out o' the rain an' slep' proper, along o' the dog. But yes'd'y, mum, it was a bit off. I tramped miles to keep myself warm an' gets to 'Endon. There I falls in with a lady-tramp an' her kid, an' she bones my 'at an' my clothes an' gives me this 'ere clobber instead. 'Orrerble woman she was. An' a wuss kid. Set on my face, kid did, to keep me from 'ollerin,' while 'is mother took my trousers off an' then bunged me this 'ere gel's jacket what I got on now in place o' the one what was legally mine. They clumped me about, arter that, an' left me, an' I felt so done up an' miserable I 'adn't the 'eart to foller 'em fur.

“Since then, 'm, I bin wanderin' about, beggin'—an' not gettin' much. If it 'adn't bin for Snuff 'ere bein' sech comp'ny to me, I reckon I'd ha' made a 'ole in the water an' done myself in, I would. But I didn't like to chuck Snuff. Last night I got into a tool-'ouse in a farm-yard an' slep' dry. This mornin', though, I wasn't 'alf stiff an' shaky like. *You* know?” Miss Ivy shook her head. “I eat some red berries out of a 'edge to fill up ; but they only made me beas'ly sick. Arter that I got somehow into the streets agin. I went where they was shops about, but I never picked up nothing. . . . One good

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thing Snuff done all right. Nicked a lump o' steak out of a butcher's. . . . An' so I went a-wanderin' on until I comes down 'ere. It was jest as if I was drunk—all the 'ouses bobbin about an' that, an' the pa'ments wavin' up an' down ; an' me in the road one minute, an' then 'angin' on to the sides o' the 'ouses the next.

“Then I spots your winder, lookin' so bright, wi' the fire jumpin', an' you a-playin' cards by your lonesome. An' I thinks to myself, 'She's a kind 'un, I bet. I'll go an' chance my bloomin' arm an' arst her for a bit o' tommy.' But soon as I pushes the gate open, I seems to come over funnier'n ever. Things as 'ad bin playin' see-saw before was goin' round an' round for a change now ; an' when I looks at Snuff, though he was a-pawin' my legs, he seemed to be about a mile an' a 'alf away. At last I falls down—ker-flop !—an' then I wakes up an' I'm planted 'ere.”

He smiled up at her trustfully. For fully a minute she did not speak, but sat regarding him. He lowered his gaze in some confusion, huddled himself up closer together on the hearth-rug and began absently to smooth Snuff's head.

“Poor child !” murmured Miss Ivy, at length.

She laid her hand on his tangled hair. Again he looked up hopefully into her kind eyes. Reading the compassion in them he was suddenly overcome. His face was painfully contorted by the working in him of a storm of suppressed

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emotions. Miss Ivy saw the tight mouth grow weakly tremulous. Tears suffused the dark eyes. And Deuce—very child now!—was seeking to hide the shame of his childishness in the shelter of Snuff's stiff, muddy hide.

The dog gave vent to a mournful howl.

Miss Ivy sank down, with a rustle of silk, upon her knees beside the bowed figure of the boy. She took one of his hands between her two cool palms, crooned over him, kissed him—half shyly—but with all the warmth and tenderness of her thwarted womanhood.

They stayed like that for what to the woman was an eternity of dear, tormenting emotion.

TENTH CHAPTER

WORLDLY STRATEGY

THE prosaic sound of a key grating in the lock of the street-door sundered them. Followed a busy wiping of boots on the mat in the tiny hall, then footsteps tapping on the floor-cloth smartly.

“Hush! Dry your eyes,” whispered Miss Ivy.

As she spoke some one knocked at the room door.

“May I come in, Miss Porch?” inquired a male voice.

“Oh, Mr. Gandy, do,” she called out.

A short, stout gentleman entered. His face was round and ruddy, the features of a blunt cast, the eyes small, bright, restless. He wore a stubby clipped moustache, hair that could scarcely be dubbed false because it was such a palpable wig, and a single eye-glass. His clothes had a dandified cut. There was waggery in the broad fancy waistcoat; the gold horse-shoe pin in the four-in-hand tie of a Paisley pattern bespoke a latent sporting bent that the solidity and weight of his watch-chain and heavy seals

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could not quite annul the effect of. His trousers were of grey shepherd's plaid, roomy round the thighs, tight about the calf. An ample display of cuff revealed that his shirt was striped with curly pink lines. This was Mr. Sidney Gandy, managing clerk to Messrs. Doody and Doody, wool merchants, of the Wool Exchange, Coleman Street, E.C. He was a bachelor and Miss Porch's lodger, renting the first floor.

"Nasty evening," he remarked. He had not yet caught sight of Deuce, who was hidden from him by the table. "Precious snug and cosy in here, though." He moved round toward the fire and then saw the boy and the dog. "Hullo!" he cried. Snuff raised his shoulder-bridles and growled. "What the deuce——!"

"Do sit down," Miss Ivy entreated him. "It is about this poor child I want to speak to you, Mr. Gandy. I know you have a kind heart."

"I am a man of the world, madam."

"Yes. And that is precisely why I wish to ask your advice."

"But you won't take it, all the same. Not you," said Mr. Gandy. "Who ever takes advice? I don't. You don't. Nobody does. Why? I'll tell you. Advice is of two kinds. Good and bad. The advice you give is good—always. The advice you receive is bad—always. At least, that is my experience."

WORLDLY STRATEGY

"You know I always take your advice, Mr. Gandy," she said reproachfully.

"Simply because I always know what you want to do, and advise you to do it. It's the secret of my small success with the ladies. Confess, now, Miss Porch. Have you or have you not made up your mind about this boy already? Come, now. Don't you feel that you are about to do something exceedingly unwise? And aren't you, in your heart, when you ask me for my advice, merely seeking to divide with me the responsibility of some folly or other? Miss Porch, I know your sex." He shook his head at her.

Miss Ivy blushed. "I don't think I have quite made up my mind to do anything as yet," she faltered. "That is to say——"

Mr. Gandy pointed his finger at Deuce. "How did he get here?"

"I will tell you."

She told him. Deuce listened to her translation of his story with his gaze set intently on the gentleman's face.

"Do you wish me to say what I think, or what you would wish me to say?" asked Mr. Gandy, when she had done speaking.

"Say just what is in your mind," said she.

"Very well. Here we have a boy and a dog. . . . What kind of a dog do you call it, young man?"

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"Dunno. Just dog," answered Deuce. "No mangy class about Snuff. Is there, ole fat?"

"In that case," said Mr. Gandy, "I should advise, first of all, that the animal be destroyed."

Deuce scrambled to his feet. "Like to see you at it!" he exclaimed. "Kill Snuff? It'd take a man to do it, not a monkey."

"I think——" protested Miss Ivy.

"One moment." Mr. Gandy winked at her solemnly. "But, my boy, you yourself admit that the dog is worthless."

"No, I don't, then," said Deuce. "That's where you come a bloomer, that is. He's worth more to me 'n what you are. He's worth more to me 'n what a blow-out is, or my kip, or anyfing. I took my davy, when he nuzzled up to me, I'd look after him. An' I spit my death an' all, an' I'll stick to it."

"Speaking as a man of the world," said Mr. Gandy, "I should think you exceedingly foolish to set the welfare of your dog above your own welfare . . . if I believed in you. But I don't believe in you. No doubt it is very clever and artful to pretend that you love your pet so much you would rather suffer yourself than see it come to any harm. It both looks well and sounds well. I admit that. It might strike some people as being a bit pathetic in a way. Nine people out of ten, very likely, would think you an uncommonly grand little chap. But

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you can't take me in, you know. I've had some."

"'Ere, come on, Snuff," said Deuce, eyeing Mr. Gandy fiercely. "We'll get out o' this, quick. They can keep their muckin' charity for them as ain't quite so particular as us. An' don't you think, ole One-eye, as we ain't got no friends. You ain't the only onion in the soup. We got lashin's o' friends!" he cried, lying valiantly. He shambled toward the door. "Thank *you*, 'm," he muttered, as he let himself out. "You're all right, *you* are." And he left the room.

Now all this while Miss Ivy had been wrestling with herself desperately as she sat listening in her chair and casting appealing glances at her hard-hearted lodger. It was only by dint of violent nictitation that he had prevented her from spoiling his game long before this juncture.

Deuce closed the door behind him. They heard the patter of his bare feet on the cold linoleum in the hall, and then the click of the latch. The street-door slammed to, caught in a gust of wind.

"Mr. Gandy, I really cannot——" exclaimed Miss Ivy, jumping up.

"Of course you can't. Neither can I," said he, and darted from the room.

He went bareheaded into the wind and rain. Through the driving welter of blown drops he

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could dimly discern the two dejected figures of the boy and the dog passing out through the garden gate. He ran after them. Deuce heard the sound of his pursuing footsteps, looked over his shoulder and fled.

“Hi Hi!” shouted Mr. Gandy. “Come back!”

But Deuce only sprinted the faster.

Then Mr. Gandy, holding on his wig with one hand, gave chase in earnest. Ordinarily he could have had little chance enough of overtaking the boy; but Deuce was weak and ill from want and exposure. His strength was soon spent. Before he had gone a hundred yards his legs collapsed under him, and he toppled into the gutter. He was up again instantly, however; reeling but unafraid. The round, portly figure of his pursuer was pounding down on him. And he could run no further. He staggered into the roadway, stooped and picked up one or two flints. Then he scurried away to the opposite pavement, set his back against a wall, and stood with his dog between his legs, at bay.

“You lea’ me be,” he panted. “You lea’ me be. Or you’ll get one o’ these ’ere stones at your ugly napper, an’ quick.”

“I’m not going to hurt you, boy,” said Mr. Gandy breathlessly.

“I’ll mark that,” said Deuce.

“It was only my fun about the dog.”

WORLDLY STRATEGY

“Yus, an’ these stones is only my fun.”

“Do listen,” said Mr. Gandy. “I assure you I was only testing you when I talked as I did just now.”

“Was you though !” cried Deuce scornfully.

“I was indeed. Do, like a good chap, let me take you back. Come, now.”

Deuce, wholly distrustful still, sidled away from Mr. Gandy along by the damp wall. He felt that he was going to faint again as he had fainted on Miss Porch’s doorstep ; and if he did that, he reflected, what was to prevent this beastly fat man from taking Snuff and killing him forthwith, as he had threatened to do ? It was an *impasse* from which there seemed to be no way of escape either for him or for Mr. Gandy.

But a way of escape was found.

It was found by Miss Ivy, who now came fluttering through the wet gloom, looking ghostly and tall in an old grey mackintosh, hastily thrown over her head with the two empty sleeves flapping wildly from her shoulders and snapping in the wind.

“Dear child !” she gasped, approaching Deuce. “Do come back.”

Deuce, still doubting, edged yet further away, but more, much more slowly.

“Spit your death—— !” he muttered feebly, and then sank down on the streaming flags.

ELEVENTH CHAPTER

MISS IVY PORCH'S SECOND VENTURE INTO THE REALMS OF ROMANCE

Miss IVY was looking through the contents of her desk. She turned over queer little packets of seeds, faded photographs, black flowers that fell to dust at a touch, letters written in pale yellow ink, a few locks of hair tied with ribbon, fragments of broken jewellery, a silk glove, some programmes of dances scrawled over with initials, the hundred and one small things that women write their histories with. At last she found what she sought, a platinotype wrapped in a pink silk scarf.

It was the photograph of a young man. He wore the garb of an earlier generation that to moderns always appears so unsightly. The tints of the picture were blurred and faint ; but enough was left to show that the young man had been good-looking. And yet there was little in his good looks to appeal to a ripe discernment. The contours of the face were too fleshy ; the features small to effeminacy, almost to meanness.



“Do, like a good chap, let me take you back”



MISS IVY PORCH'S SECOND VENTURE

Two black dots were all that remained of the eyes ; but the brow above, though high, was depressed at the temples. A slight moustache shaded the upper lip. The whiteness and evenness of the teeth were revealed by a smile that had been transparently affected to display them to the best advantage. The face, indeed, was that of the Knave whom Miss Ivy (then a novice at the woman's game of Patience) had mistaken for the King. She had given him her love too readily for her happiness. He had seemed to love her at first. Then he had tired of her and ridden away. He wrote to her once from America. It was such a letter as would have impelled a brother to cross the Atlantic with a whip in his kit. Miss Ivy had no brother. If she had had one she would never have shown the letter to him. She thought it too dear and precious for other eyes than hers to see. To her there was nothing of falseness or cruelty in it. She would have scouted the notion that she had aught to forgive her recreant lover. She hid him in her heart as the eternal type of all that is best and greatest in man—a glorious figment.

Reverently she raised the portrait to her lips.

A dry, feeble cough sounded from behind her. She replaced the contents of the desk, locked it and put it back on the sideboard. Then she crossed the room to a little white bed in a shadowy corner. There lay Deuce with Snuff outstretched

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on the coverlet at his feet. He was awake, and smiled up at her. She sat down beside him. He withdrew his hand from beneath the sheet and extended it toward her. As she had done on the night when he first came to her door, so she took it now between her own palms and fondled it. The tiny, thin fingers still had power to hold her heart in their warm clutch. She felt a welling up of joy in her breast, as if a new bright light of love had been kindled in her heart.

“How is my little boy?”

“Better, better,” he said. “I shall soon be quite better now.”

“Quite well, my dear,” she corrected him.

“Quite well,” he repeated obediently.

For all his present aim was to please his benefactress.

“Would you like to sit up?”

He saw that she was eager to render him some small kind service. Her fussiness irked him at times. At that moment he would have been more content to lie still. But he nodded, and in the look of tender delight that illumined her face as she re-arranged his pillows and raised him up he had his immediate reward.

“Some grapes?”

He really would like some grapes. She skinned them for him delicately and as she handed them to him one by one cautioned him to be careful not to swallow the seeds. This quite spoilt his

MISS IVY PORCH'S SECOND VENTURE

enjoyment of the fruit, but he suffered her gladly.

"Do you feel strong enough to talk, dear?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "O, yes."

"Say 'Yes, Aunt Ivy.' Always call me 'Aunt Ivy,'" she said, trembling. She had meant to ask him to call her 'mother,' but her courage had failed her at the critical moment, and so the chance was lost for ever.

"Yes, Aunt Ivy," said he. "Dear Aunt Ivy," he added, moved to a swift inspiration.

"I must think of a name for you, too," she mused. "Deuce is too dreadful, isn't it?"

Her mind was still running on the photograph. "Do you like the name of Walter?"

He was about to shake his head vigorously; he had known a half-witted loon named Walter, but, seeing that she loved the name, he said: "That's my favourite name."

"Perhaps," she ventured, "there was once somebody very dear to you named Walter?"

Again, in response to the appeal of her eyes, he replied, "Yes, Aunt Ivy." And then he saw that her lips were quivering, and that she had turned white.

"Was it some strong, pale man?" she asked. And her voice was hoarse from agitation. "Some strong, pale man who used to take you on his knee when you were just a little, wee chap, and

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kiss you, and hold you tight to him, and call you 'My son'?" Her imagination was bearing her away back to the dreamland she had created : the Eden which she and the fickle lover of her youth were to inhabit together. "This other man who called himself your father . . . whom you never loved . . . he was not the only one you remember?"

"Oh, no," said Deuce.

"There was another, who lived before him?"

Deuce, sorely perplexed, knew that to please her he must again say 'Yes.' "Yes," said he, then, hastily, "Aunt Ivy."

She half rose from her chair. The slanting, western light streamed in, touching her sallow face kindly. Her hands, in their long, black mittens, hovered restlessly about her knees. At last she could no longer control the impulse that was consuming her. She got up and crossed the room. Deuce heard her fumbling at a lock. There was a musical jingle of keys.

She came back, holding something in her hand.

"Was that strong, pale man at all like this?" she asked, showing him the portrait of her peccant lover.

Now Deuce, sadly enough, had not been taught to revere truth overmuch, Cowcross's teaching consisting more of warning than precept : certainly he had not learned to set truth above kindness. He had no interest in this picture

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beyond the interest any boy might take in a photographer's show-case. But he knew full well what Miss Ivy wanted him to say, and somehow there seemed to be hope for him in her eagerness to prompt him. He knew, moreover, that if he answered truthfully, she would be bitterly disappointed and pained. So he lied with veteran glibness.

"It's awful like him," he averred.

"I knew it," she cried. "An instinct told me it was so. This is an answer to my prayers." She pressed her hands hard against her labouring bosom. "Oh, but is it really like him? Is it, really? Look again, Deuce . . . Walter! What colour were his eyes? Had he golden hair?"

"Golden as anyfing."

"And his eyes?"

Deuce was in a quandary.

"They was darkish," he said at length; "I don't rightly remember."

"Blue?"

"Yes."

"But sometimes, in certain lights, they had a pale glow?"

"Pale as anyfing."

"And what was *his* name?"

"I dunno."

"It was not Marketer?"

"No. Not Marketer."

Miss Ivy breathed heavily.

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“ And your mother ? ”

“ I don't 'ardly remember her,” said Deuce, relieved at being able to speak the truth at last.

“ What was she like ? ”

“ Red face an' that.”

“ What did she call him ? ”

“ Ask me another. All sorts o' 'orrerble things, I think. I couldn't tell 'em to you, 'm.”

“ But how did you know this man was your father ? ”

“ I never said 'e was. I don't know. But he used to sleep along o' mother an' me.” Miss Ivy winced. “ An' he was always knockin' her about.”

“ No. No, no,” she cried.

Deuce saw that he had blundered.

“ Pr'aps it was her knockin' him about.”

“ Ah, my poor dear ! ”

“ Any'ow, 'e cleared out one day, and that was the last of him,” said Deuce, boldly ridding himself for all time, as he hoped, of this fictional pale, strong man, who was landing him at every step into such a quagmire of deception.

“ And you are sure the photograph is like him ? ”

“ I'd know it for him anywhere,” said Deuce, with a sigh.

And Miss Ivy asked him no more questions, doubted no longer ; but possessed her starved soul of the conviction that Deuce was proved

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beyond all cavil to be the child of her old, lost lover. She forgot how she had forced the character upon him, reconciled to her own satisfaction all the very apparent inconsistencies and improbabilities that must, on a calm consideration, destroy her dear, new-born romance. For what part has cold reason to play in these warm, sunlit realms? The wish was (in the old-fashioned phrase) father to the thought. Her beloved Walter was as surely the father of this poor, humble waif . . . After all, we must every one live in a world that is—at least, in part—one of our own creation, if we would escape dry-rot of the soul. Women, especially, must play God's deputy. So Miss Ivy bound her beautiful phylacteries about her brows and was blessed.

TWELFTH CHAPTER

CONSISTING OF EXTRACTS FROM THE RESPECTIVE DIARIES OF MISS IVY PORCH AND MR. SIDNEY GANDY

October 9. Miss Porch's Diary.—To-day my dear boy was able to leave his bed for the first time. I made him cosy in the big arm-chair and read *Ministering Children* to him. He is very like his father. Only the eyes and hair are different, being dark. His nose and mouth I feel sure will develop into exactly the same shape as Walter's. He had a bowl of bread and milk in the afternoon and half a boiled chicken. Snuff had the other half (which I had intended for Mr. Gandy) whilst I went to the door to take in a heap of letters that came from the registry. I really am worried at not being able to get a new maid. Heaps call, but none of them quite suit (or is it "suits"?) me. I mentioned my difficulty to Mr. Gandy, and he advised me not to wear my mittens when I interview them. I cannot understand what my mittens have to do with it, and I told him so.

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"I know I am stupid," I said.

"If you were stupid," he said, "that is the one thing you would not know."

I sometimes think that his mind is more agile than profound. But, of course, I may be wrong.

Same date. Mr. Gandy's Diary. Home late. No new maid yet. But if she wears those mittens what can she expect? Girls naturally think she is a frumpish, precise old maid. No followers and fringes allowed, and all that kind of thing. We had a little argument about it. I must guard against the temptation to be witty. I find it leads to an indulgence in indiscreet *dicta*. Curious, by the way, how much easier it is to say smart things that one does not really mean than to say smart things that one does mean. I can see that she is going to make a girl of that boy. . . . I was promised half a boiled chicken for supper; but the promise found inadequate fulfilment in the usual cold mutton.

October 13. Miss Porch's Diary. My dear boy is now well enough to walk about a little. He walks just as his father did. I don't know what to do about getting him some new clothes. His old rags I have, of course, had burnt. At present he is wearing a combination garment made out of one of my old flannel petticoats. He does not seem to be in his usual spirits, which troubles me.

I suggested that he should sit out on the lawn

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as it was a warm, sunny afternoon, and Mr. Goss's boys next door—who are quite nice and genteel—were playing in their back garden. He asked me, "Is it a high wall?" I gathered from this that he felt the need of juvenile society, and was eager to make the acquaintance of our little neighbours; but when I explained to him that the wall was quite low he said he would rather stay indoors. How labyrinthine is a child's mind! In the evening I mentioned the matter of clothes to Mr. Gandy. I thought him less sympathetic than usual.

Same date. Mr. Gandy's Diary. Poor kid! He hops about, wrapped in gloom and grey flannel, as if he were practising for a sack race which he had no hope of winning.

She wants to dress him (I think) in a green Tam o' Shanter, a pale blue suit, red stockings, and white buckled shoes. Perhaps it isn't so bad as that. I don't remember the exact details. I suggested a cream silk pinafore trimmed with silk bows as a suitable addition to the proposed outfit. But there was no enthusiasm shown.

No mention of shirts, or so on, whatever. At present Master Deuce is wearing one of her chemises under the tortured petticoat. This I know by the sort of ham-frill round his neck.

The new maid, from Devonshire, has a sense of humour, bounded on the north, south, east,

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and west by the walls of every room in which she encounters the boy.

October 15. Miss Porch's Diary. The dear boy has great nobleness of character. When he saw his new suit he said it was "too fancy" for him. "Any common-lookin' clobber would have done for me," he said, with such a pathetic emphasis on the pronoun. "They're too good," he said. "Can't you change 'em for two cheap 'uns?" I told him that he should never wear anything common or cheap. He positively groaned under the burden of his obligations to me! Obligations! If he only knew!

I had intended to take him out for a short walk this afternoon; but as I was putting on his new overcoat he was suddenly seized with faintness. I should be very unhappy about this, if he had not picked up wonderfully since.

Snuff looks quite a gentlemanly dog with a violet ribbon round his neck. I had no idea before that animals were so vain. Snuff seems never to tire of sitting down and adjusting the ribbon with his hind paw. Bibi is obviously jealous.

Same date. Mr. Gandy's Diary. Angels and ministers of grace defend us! Deuce is clothed and in his right mind—at present. I wish I could say the same of her. I have never seen anything like him off a Christmas tree.

The main scheme of the outrage is frankly

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Fauntleroy. The deep lace collar is there ; the lace ruffles at the wrist are there also ; round the knees is the same curtailed bed-vallance. Imagine a man who has spent his afternoon with a lady at a remnant sale, his evening at an injudicious banquet with Wagner to follow : imagine, I say, this suffering creature asleep and dreaming that he has married a rainbow with one kaleidoscopic result in the shape of a split prism. And you have Deuce. He is indescribable.

One thing I have found out, *inter alia*. It is not a chemise that the boy has been wearing, but one of her bed-gowns. And she must be unusually subject to cold feet to wear them so long. How did I make this discovery ? If you are a married man, take and put on your wife's nightdress in lieu of a shirt under your ordinary clothes, button yourself up tight, then reduce yourself by half—and you will know. The boy is so buttressed fore and aft, he looks like a lemon on two pipe-stems.

She has belled the cat and ribboned the dog. Snuff could never have been beautiful ; indeed, his ugliness bordered on the pious. And he is uglier than ever now. But his expression of long-suffering goodness, that set him apart and made his unsightliness picturesque, has vanished. He looks as if he were forever lamenting the fact that it is impossible to break more than ten commandments. He ate his "paunch" this

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evening in a way that made me think somehow of cold boiled baby.

October 16. Miss Porch's Diary. To-day I have to record a dreadful occurrence. My hand trembles so at the thought of it I can hardly put pen to paper. But I must control my agitation if I am to keep my diary written up, as I intend that it shall be if only that I may have for the joy of years to come an authentic account of my dear boy's progress.

The fine weather continuing, I suggested that he should come with me for a walk this afternoon. He is quite strong enough now to brave the elements. His appetite is good, and he runs about. Indeed, his activity is almost excessive. He came downstairs this morning *via* the banisters and burst two of the beautiful pearl buttons off his jacket. Dear boy! he is so loth to give me any trouble—trouble!—that he implored me not to sew them on again; but of course I did so. And then I showed him the new bow I had made for him last night. I had intended it as a surprise, and it was quite a success in that respect. He could not find words to thank me.

He did not want to go for a walk at first. I fancy children have a subtle prescience of evil that is lacking in us of older growth, who have allowed our finer sensibilities to be blunted by the shocks of Time. But I was firm, for his health's sake, and he yielded. I cannot tell you

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how pretty he looked in his new magenta hat with the goose-quill. I am glad, also, that I got him those gloves, as his hands seem to have been dreadfully neglected. We took Snuff with us.

We had not gone far before I perceived—though people say I am short-sighted—that Walter attracted a good deal of attention. Other boys stopped to look at him and pointed him out to their companions. One child, who could hardly have been nine years old, was so fascinated by the splendour of my dear boy's attire that he followed us for quite a long way, almost treading on Walter's heels in his anxiety to obtain a closer view of his habiliments. He was joined by other boys. I have always been led to suppose that boys are not, as a rule, keenly appreciative of beauty ; but I have rid myself of that delusion for ever—an instance of a loss that is also a gain. For these children kept giving vent to their feelings of admiration in delighted chuckles. Some, however, I regret to say, were meanly envious. I heard one or two remark that they wouldn't wear clothes like that "for monkey nuts." (I quote their own quaint idiom here.)

Well, we got to the High Street, where I purposed doing some shopping. (Note—Shirts.) It was in the High Street that we met the gentlemanly boy. He came straight up to us, raised his cap and bowed. "Please," he said, "where did you get that hat?" I told him "At Ford-



“ Please,” he said, “ where did you get that hat ?”

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ham's—just over the way." He thanked me effusively.

All this time my dear boy—such is his modesty!—had been turning alternately pale and red with embarrassment. I sadly fear that in some respects the weaker sex is also the inferior sex. If Walter had been a girl he would have gone peacocking along as pleased as possible. As it was, he kept very, very close to me, and seemed delicately anxious not to emphasise in any way the contrast between his own appearance and that of the other boys.

So we came to Marchant's. I went in to buy the linen, leaving him outside with Snuff. The young fellow, though civil, was very stupid, and it was quite a long time before I got anything in the least like what I wanted. I daresay I spent altogether twenty minutes in the shop. At last I was suited. I gathered up my purchases and left.

And then I saw . . . But how can I describe the awful scene that I beheld on emerging from the shop? Once more my pen falters in my nerveless hand as I conjure it up before me.

Marchant's is, of course, situate at the corner of Maidstone Villas, a very quiet, respectable thoroughfare. Indeed, Mr. Hampson lives there. But this afternoon its character had quite changed.

There was a crowd of boys and great hulking men assembled in the road. From the midst



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came a Babel of shouts and laughter, and in addition an ear-splitting uproar as if a hundred mad dogs were fighting. Such a din of barks and growls and squeals, such a chorus of ribald cries, hand-clapping, and vulgar guffaws, I never heard before in my life. And in the centre of this turmoil I saw, to my infinite horror and alarm, no less a sight than Walter's magenta hat tossing wildly hither and thither, the goose-quill broken, alas ! and the stiffening all crumpled.

For a horrible moment I could not see Walter himself, but suddenly his face appeared. The hat was still adhering to his head, thanks to the elastic band, despite the rough usage to which it had been subjected. . . . My darling child was being fought by the gentlemanly boy—he who had asked for Fordham's address—and one or two others. His nose was bleeding. The fiends had thrown mud at him, and in his efforts to wipe it off he had smeared it all over his cheeks and chin. He looked truly horrible. Naturally the common instinct of self-preservation, strong in the best of us, actuated him to try to defend himself. His dear little fists in their new gloves were knocking the gentlemanly boy's face.

At the same moment I saw a confused mass of brown and white fur struggling in the gutter. It was Snuff and another dog biting at one another. The other dog was underneath, and

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had somehow got itself entangled in the violet ribbon that I put on Snuff only yesterday. Snuff had the brown dog by the throat, and was sopping up a puddle with it in quite a methodical way. The men and the boys were stumbling and tripping over them. I saw, every now and then, a fierce kick administered, but nothing seemed to affect Snuff, he was so absorbed.

All this I perceived, as it were, in a flash. I pushed into the crowd and seized my poor boy.

"Let me go!" he shouted, wriggling in my grasp and uttering wicked words. "Think I'm goin' to let that kid make game o' me?"

"Walter!" I implored him, "it is I."

But he did not seem to hear me. He wrenched himself away and began to knock the gentlemanly boy's face again. The gentlemanly boy fell down, crying. Then Walter turned and saw me. I called him by name once more.

"Leave 'em be. Let 'em fight it out," said one of the great, hulking men. "Your boy's doin' A 1, in spite o' the luggage in his weskit."

(I try to reproduce their dialect—as the best authors do—for the sake of verisimilitude.)

I dragged Walter away.

"Snuff! Where's Snuff?" he cried. "Go it, ole fat!" he shouted, as he caught sight of the mass of fur and mud in the gutter. "Good ole fat! Jest that bit o' wet in the corner an' you'll ha' done him proper."

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Snuff stayed to give the brown dog a final shake, then threw it away, and came crawling to us. He was very dirty, but apparently uninjured.

The crowd still surged about us. So, to escape it, I hailed a cab, and we drove home.

“What did that gentlemanly boy hit you for?” I asked Walter.

“*He* never 'it *me*!” Walter replied.

“But your nose is bleeding,” I said.

“That was agin 'is 'ead,” said my brave lad, making light of his injury. “Fair beano, though, the way Snuff mopped up the street with that there Sunah! I ain't never bin in a cab before,” he added, inconsequently.

So the incident closed. . . .

I have just finished cleaning and mending my dear boy's clothes. They look almost as good as new again.

Same date. Mr. Gandy's Diary. . . . How I wish I had been there.

THIRTEENTH CHAPTER

CONSISTING OF MORE EXTRACTS FROM THE
RESPECTIVE DIARIES OF MISS IVY PORCH
AND MR. SIDNEY GANDY

October 18. Miss Porch's Diary. My dear boy came down to breakfast in excellent spirits this morning. He wore the old combination garment again. But he did not complain.

"I suppose, Aunt Ivy," he said ruefully, "I shan't ever be able to wear my nice new suit and hat any more, after the way they got mucked up yesterday?" He tried very hard to look as if he did not greatly care for the loss of his beautiful apparel; but I was not deceived. "It is a pity, ain't it," he said. "But never mind. What I think is," he went on, "I ought to have something more ordinary, like other boys. Why should I be pampered up? An' then, you see, I'm such a terror wi' my things."

I laughed gaily. "What would you say," I asked him, "if I told you I had made your clothes look as good as new again?" Then, perceiving from the clouded expression of his

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face that he thought I was merely teasing him, I went at once and fetched his restored garments. When he saw them his feelings of mingled gratitude and relief were too much for his stout little heart. He burst into tears. I soothed him by telling him that I would take him out for another walk later in the day.

"If I am well enough," he said. "You mean if I am well enough, don't you, Aunt Ivy?"

You may imagine my alarm. "You do not feel unwell?" I said.

"My nose aches where I knocked it," he said, "an' my head aches, too. An' I feel a bit sick. I think, Aunt Ivy, I'd like to lay down."

I was terribly upset. I offered to carry him upstairs, but he said, "No"; he thought he could manage to crawl up, somehow. I made him as comfortable as I could with some extra pillows and left him. That was at 9.30. Ten minutes later I peeped into his room, with his clothes over my arm. He was asleep. I thought it best to wake him up, however, for fear lest he should not have a proper night's rest. I called to him, at first softly, but he did not stir. He was breathing more heavily than usual. Then I tapped him gently on the shoulder. Still I could not rouse him.

In the end I decided to leave him to his slumbers and went out alone. But I felt much concerned and ill at ease, so much so that I made up my

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mind to call in a doctor if he did not improve before the evening.

I was gone nearly an hour.

On my return the first thing I noticed was that Walter's clothes had disappeared from the sofa where I had placed them, neatly folded up, before I left the house. Now, whatever else I may be that is sinful, I am, at least, a lover of order and tidiness, and I am not one to mislay things or forget where I put them last. I therefore concluded that my dear boy had got up and dressed himself. But when I peeped again into his room I found him there just as I had left him and still fast asleep. His breathing was quite stertorous now. I felt sure that he must be sickening for some terrible disease, and I stole away in a simply shocking state of distress.

I went to the kitchen. The girl was peeling potatoes.

"Rosalie," I said, "have you seen Master Walter's clothes?"

"Ay, that I have," she replied. And the stupid girl giggled.

I confess that I may have couched my next question in a tone of some asperity. "What on earth are you laughing at, Rosalie?" I asked her.

"Bless you, 'm," she said, "I bean't a-laughin', I think they be very pretty, I do."

"But where are they?"

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"I don't know," said the aggravating creature.

"But you say you have seen them?"

"Yes'm."

"Where?"

"On the boy, of course, yesterday."

"Kindly refer to my nephew as Master Walter in future, please," said I. Then: "Haven't you seen them to-day at all?"

She shook her head.

I could not make out what had become of them. I returned to the parlour and changed my walking shoes for my carpet-slippers. I find that that often clears the brain. Then I crept back to my dear boy's room. I pushed open the door. It yielded a few inches and then seemed to stick fast for an instant. I pushed harder, and it flew open.

I was just in time to catch Walter in the act of climbing into bed.

"Walter," I exclaimed, "you are awake then?"

One makes these unnecessary, senseless observations at emotional crises.

"Yes, Aunt Ivy," he replied, quite as unnecessarily.

"Do you feel better?"

"Quite better, Aunt Ivy," he answered me.

I sat down and looked round the room, but I could not see the clothes anywhere.

"Have you been downstairs?" I asked him.

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He seemed rather confused. "Yes," he said, after a short pause.

"You took your clothes, then? That's right. But where have you put them?"

He reddened, but was silent.

"Where are they?" I repeated.

"I don't know," was his truly amazing reply.

"You don't know!" I cried.

"No, Aunt Ivy."

"But—" I could hardly gasp out the words—"but you say you took them. What have you done with them?"

He hid his face in the pillow. "You won't be cross wi' me, Aunt Ivy?" he whimpered.

"Certainly not," said I, "if you tell me the truth."

"I—I gave them away," said he.

I confess I was staggered at this. The whole affair was so mysterious, so inexplicable.

"But, Walter, who did you give them to?" I said, feeling dazed.

"To a poor beggar-boy," said he, still hiding his face in the pillow.

I was more bewildered than ever. But I summoned my small reserves of will-power to my aid and managed to maintain a calm demeanour.

"Come," I said. "You must explain the whole matter to me."

"He was such a poor little boy," began Walter, "so ragged and thin, 'e was."

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“ But how did you come across him ? You have not been out ? ”

“ No, Aunt Ivy, I saw him from the parlour winder.”

“ Well ? ”

“ He says to me, ‘ I wish I was you, ‘appy an’ comf’able an’ all like that. I an’t got no ‘ome. I’m a poor orphan without nobody to look arter me or love me,’ he says. Well, Aunt Ivy, when he told me that I felt so sorry for him I went an’ got my nice new suit an’ ‘at an’ chucked ‘em out o’ winder to him. I never seemed to think about what I was doin’. I was that sorry for him, Aunt Ivy ” . . .

How strangely are we constituted ! What a wild mixture of good and bad goes to the making of one poor human soul ! It is almost incredible to me now ; but my first feeling on hearing Walter’s confession was one of sheer annoyance. I lost sight altogether of the fact that what my dear boy had done only afforded me still another signal proof—if proof were needed—of his innate nobleness of character. Think of the wonderful generosity of it ! Quixotic, if you will, but how fine ! Yet it was on the tip of my tongue to say to him “ How silly of you ! ” Fortunately I checked myself in time. “ You darling child ! ” was what I did say. “ You shall have another suit just like it, and another hat that shall make the magenta one seem absolutely dingy by contrast ! ”

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"No, no," he cried in an agony of regret ; and I knew then that I had betrayed by some fleeting nuance of expression my momentary annoyance. "No, no ; I don't deserve it. I oughtn't to 'ave give 'em away. Buy me something common this time. Dear Auntie Ivy, I would like something common ever so much better."

He was quite hysterical. I soothed him as best I could, and so the incident closed. But (I am writing this at 4 P.M.) I shall consult Mr. Gandy on the matter as soon as he returns from the City.

Same date. Mr. Gandy's Diary. Silence is a great liar. As soon as I got into the house she pounced on me, and dragged me into the parlour. She had something to tell me. It was all about her dear boy and his kaleidoscopic clothes. I listened without comment. As I said before, silence is a great liar. But of all the wild cock-and-bull stories that I have ever had to pretend to accept as gospel the story she told me was, I think, the wildest. One thing is plain : the youngster has got rid of his weird garments somehow. And small blame to him ! That he disposed of the things in the way he says he did I refuse to believe. He was present at our interview, and I never saw a less artistic liar in my life. Still, once more, silence is even a greater liar. And I held my tongue.

When I did speak it was to ask the soaring young cretin to be good enough to run upstairs

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and fetch a non-existent pipe for me from off my mantel-piece. As soon as he had left the room I turned to her and said gravely :

“ Now, Miss Porch, I’m going to give you a piece of good advice.” She grew nervous at once, naturally expecting something unpleasant. “ It’s about that boy,” I went on.

She shaped the word “ Yes,” dumbly with dry lips.

“ He is a fine young fellow.”

That fetched her. “ Yes. Isn’t he !” she cried.

“ He is like a beautifully-tempered sword blade,” said I. “ He needs careful handling. A false stroke in tierce or parry . . .” I was careful to keep it as impressively vague as possible. . . . “ One false stroke, and what happens ? ”

“ What ? ” she faltered.

“ The steel rusts. The edge is blunted. The thing of beauty becomes—not a joy for ever, but a sad memorial of wasted possibilities.”

I thought that was sufficiently unintelligible for my purpose ; and she paid me the compliment of remarking : “ I don’t know what you mean.”

Then I huffed her. “ My meaning is plain enough,” said I. “ The boy must not be spoilt.”

“ As if——” she interposed.

“ One moment,” I said. “ You have just told me of the splendid thing which he has done.”

“ You think it splendid, too ! ”

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“Who could think otherwise? But . . . You must not mar the effect of his great act of self-denial by making up his loss to him. If, for instance, you buy him another suit of clothes that is just as good—or even better—than the one he has so generously given away, you may do him a great dis-service. You have praised him, told him how glorious he is, and so on. Well and good. Children love that sort of thing. They will do a great deal to gain the approval of their elders. And here I strike the crux of the matter.” I paused at this point to let my windy wisdom circulate through her system thoroughly. “Why,” I cried, “why do I always accept a bull’s-eye—or what not—when some little toddler offers me one? I don’t like sweets. But if I refused their kindly-meant offerings, as many thoughtless people do, the child might begin to assume that adults are not likely to take advantage of their good-nature, that it was a safe game to play, bringing them unlimited kudos and at the same time depriving them of nothing. I have even known children who made a good thing in the way of unearned increment by timely display of a seemingly liberal mind. So it is when we touch to finer issues such as that involved in this beautiful act of self-sacrifice of Deuce—Walter’s. Make him feel that while he has suffered a material loss by his kindness, he has also gained the secret of a new delight, the secret

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of that joy which lies—which lies—in the giving up to others of something that he genuinely values for its own sake. Let his self-sacrifice be real. Let him win a true victory over the natural promptings of selfishness that are, perhaps, stronger in the callow heart of a child than in our more seasoned, sophisticated hearts. . . . In short, buy him some cheap, ordinary clothes in place of the magnificent apparel that it must have given him such a very real pang to part from. That will prove him, that will test him. . . .”

“How wonderful you are!” she breathed.

But I have inflicted enough of this balderdash on myself. I did what I did for the boy’s sake. I was sincerely sorry for him, having been a boy myself with seven sisters all older than I was, and a mother who knew about as much about the juvenile male mind as a tortoise knows about the Milky Way. And never a father or a brother to protect me from outrage.

“Dear Mr. Gandy,” said she, “I feel I owe you a debt of gratitude that I can never repay. I will do as you advise. . . .”

Later. I have made a discovery. . . . The night being cold and damp, I ordered the Prairie Flower (Rosalie) to light the fire in my bedroom. This for the first time since last spring. When I went up after supper I found that the flue was smoking like a gang of navvies. Everything was covered with smuts. My first impulse was

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to ring the bell. One always wants to do something noisy when one is put out. But I reflected that Miss Ivy had already gone to bed and the girl also, so I stayed my hand. Then I was conscious of a horrible smell of burning cloth. I decided to probe the mystery for myself. I probed with the poker and brought down the magenta hat.

The young devil had stuffed all those clothes up my chimney.

I shall not put him away ; but I shall certainly advise her to-morrow to send him to school at once. . . .

FOURTEENTH CHAPTER

RETROSPECTIVE

SIX weeks is but a short time in the history of a life ; but it may witness the burial and the new birth alike of many vital interests. Change and counter-change had not ceased to wield their influence on the Slant Street gang of spoilers, though Deuce was ordained to scholarship and Miss Porch's second adventure into the realms of romance promised so much sentimental gratification to that gentle, elderly spinster.

Marketer, in fulfilment of Deuce's expectations, sought for him first of all in Parker Crescent. He went to the cobbler's shop on the morning following the boy's disappearance in lively anticipation of a delightful rumpus. He had no doubt whatever that the boy had returned to Cowcross, and he looked forward with savage satisfaction to haling him out of his retreat. He thought it not improbable that he might find it expedient to knock his old friend down. He had no doubt that he would find abundant opportunity to scarify him with some well-chosen

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insults and abuse. He was disappointed, therefore, to discover that Cowcross had no knowledge of Deuce's whereabouts. There was no mistaking the man's plain sincerity. He seemed vastly more disturbed by Marketer's account of what had occurred than was Marketer himself.

When his visitor had gone, he sat for a great while in the untidy room behind the shop, his clenched hands hanging loosely between his thighs, his brow overcast.

His new loneliness seemed to olden him suddenly. He had not realised his forlorn state so keenly whilst the boy, though taken from him, still abode hard by. He had comforted himself with the reflection that they must often meet. He had been able, at night, after the Slant Street houses were dark and all the little world was sleeping, to stand and gaze up at that room in which he had persuaded himself that Deuce lay. Out of his fierce, simple faith in an impossible Deity he had been able to draw some consolation from prayerful supplication and the invocation of divine protection for his hapless, innocent boy.

And he had been so engrossed in that pre-occupation with his late adopted son that the defection of Judith had had power to give him only intermittent pain. For he did not, in his heart, doubt that she would come back to him.

But on the day of Marketer's visit the pendulum of his mind swung violently in the direction of the

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girl who had promised to be his wife. He left his house early in the afternoon and went to call on her.

She was at home, working. Her landlady admitted him unhesitatingly as a privileged visitor there, and bade him go straight upstairs to her room. "You know the way," she said. "Though, as you ain't bin to see her for so long, I was beginnin' to wonder if you'd forgot it." She winked, lowered her voice odiously. "Somebody else has learnt the way lately," she remarked. He looked her full in the eyes, startled. Instinctively he guessed who that other was; and a hot, slow rage possessed him. He found himself tapping at Judith's door without knowing precisely how he came to be there.

"Come in," he heard her call out.

And he entered.

She had thrown down her work, and was standing very erect in the middle of the floor. There was a bright flame of colour in her cheeks; her eyes had a liquid lustre. But at sight of him she grew pale; her eyes dimmed; he saw her lips trembling.

"I thought——" she stammered.

He stood with his hat in his hand near the open door.

"You did not expect me?" he said.

"Why should I?" she rejoined.

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“ Did you . . . ” He moistened his lips. . . .
“ Did you expect any one else ? ” She made no answer, but sat down and picked up her work again listlessly. “ Did you expect any one else ? ” he repeated.

“ Bother ! ” said she.

He closed the door softly and drew nearer to her.

“ Judith,” he said, “ I do not understand this change that has come over you.”

“ What change ? ” she asked defiantly.

“ Surely,” he said, “ you will not pretend that you have not changed ? ”

“ I dunno,” was her sullen reply. “ P'r'aps I 'ave. P'r'aps I 'aven't. What of it ? ”

“ It troubles me greatly,” he said. “ I do not know what to do, how to shape my course. All the plans I had made for our future are now, because of your altered conduct, in abeyance—necessarily. I had looked forward to making you my wife . . . ”

She drew a deep breath, seemed on the verge of speech, then checked herself and remained silent.

“ On the occasion of our last meeting,” said he, “ you seemed to need time to think. I have given you a week's grace. I have not molested you in any way. But now I come to you for an answer—a definite, irrevocable answer—to one question.”

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“ Well ? ”

“ Do you intend to keep your promise ? ”

“ What promise ? ”

“ You know the promise I refer to.”

Now Judith was not skilled in fence, as he was. She had only the stock refuge of her class to fly to when serious matters posed her.

“ Do come off it,” she said, achieving flippancy by a considerable effort, for she was still in awe of the man. “ Say right out what you got to say an’ be done with it, can’t you.”

“ I will try to be sufficiently explicit,” he said, frowning. “ Some three months ago you did me the honour——”

“ Chuck it ! ”

“ ——the honour of accepting a certain proposal of marriage that I then made to you.” He cleared his throat, all unconscious of the pathetically ridiculous spectacle he presented as he enunciated thus pompously the stock phrases of a convention that had grown moribund even in the days of his youth. “ I now ask you——”

Judith, driven to desperation, fled to her sorry refuge and encamped there.

“ If you mean, Am I goin’ to marry you ? I tell you plump an’ plain, No. If you was the only man in the world I’d say No. You’re too old. You’re too slow. You ain’t pretty enough for my style. Your trousers don’t fit an’ your

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tie is up over your collar. Now, that's settled, I 'ope."

He gazed down at his greasy knees, then adjusted his neck-wear. The action was purely involuntary, for he was stunned by her brutality, and needed time to recover his scattered wits.

"Surely," he said at last, "I deserved at least a little more consideration from you than you show me at present. Am I to understand that because I am old and shabby and slow and ugly, as you say, you retract the solemn promise you gave me?"

"I s'pose so," she said, "though I dunno what you mean."

"But I cannot accept these reasons as at all satisfactory ones," said he. "I was not less deficient in attractive qualities when you accepted me. I am the same man."

"Well, I'm not the same woman. I'm older. P'r'aps I got more sense now."

He gazed at her dully. She moved restlessly under his regard. There was a silence lasting some minutes.

"When I knocked at your door just now," he said at last, "you imagined that it was Marketer who had come to see you."

A wave of scarlet stained her brow and neck. "Runnin' past yourself, ain't you?" she remarked, forcing a laugh.

"I am not a fool or blind," he said sharply.

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“Blest if the old fool ain’t jealous!” she tittered, addressing space; but her hands trembled so palpably that she had to relinquish even her pretence of sewing. “That’s too rich!”

He rose abruptly from his chair, his face contorted hideously by some hidden, overmastering emotion, and moved toward her, dragging his feet heavily after him over the bare boards. She was so afraid of this new aspect of him that she uttered a short shrill scream and crouched down, curving her arms about her head as if to ward off a blow.

“You need not be frightened,” he said, recovering his composure. “I shall not hurt *you*. . . .”

He had left her a few minutes later, saying “Good-bye” very kindly, but in a way implying that he realised it was “good-bye” indeed. He had not upbraided her nor reproached her. He had not sought to overbear her in any way by the exercise of that subtle hypnotic power of suggestion which he possessed over her ductile mind and had used successfully before. Neither did he, by entreaty or persuasion, try to win back the dutiful, fearful love that she had once given him, freely if unwillingly. Reflecting on the interview she could not withhold a certain measure of admiration for him, his dignity in spite of his absurdity, his self-restraint in spite

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of his extravagance. She wished she had been less cruel to him.

And so she took the first chance that arose to be cruel again.

Marketer was her second destined victim.

He came toward evening. Usually he presented a gay front to her, but to-night he looked dour and gloomy. He came to tell her of Deuce's disappearance, and plunged at once into details of various schemes for his recovery. He would advertise. He would employ private detectives. He would himself scour the country. He would set the police at work, the county burgesses, magistrates, and a hundred other public functionaries should all be moved to assist him in his search for the missing boy.

. . . It may be said here that these schemes came to naught in the upshot; for Marketer not only soon lost ardour but began to wonder why he had ever wanted to have Deuce back, and to congratulate himself on his loss as a good riddance of a troublesome encumbrance . . . but at the first he was hot enough, and so he continued to pour out upon distraught Judith the muddy, frothy flood of his garrulity until she told him peevishly to go away. He made her head ache, she declared, with his noisy jaw-mag.

"Look 'ere, my pretty puss," he said, "I'll ask you not to co e any o' your gyver wi' me,

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y'know. If I do go away it won't be at your biddin', an' you may cry your flesh off of your bones after I gone 'fore I come back agin to you."

"You know I never meant it, Chick," she said, hastily.

"If you meant it," he replied, "I wouldn't think o' goin', y'see, 'cos that'd only please you. It's 'cos you don't mean it—an' I know you don't—that I warn you to keep your tongue in leash."

They patched up a peace between them, and spent the evening together at a music-hall. Peter Cowcross also spent the evening at a music-hall. From the gallery he could look down on them in the fauteuils. His soul received no smirch; for not once did he raise his eyes above the footlights to the stage. He saw them rise to depart and ran down the stone stairs into the street. Presently they emerged from the grand entrance and went away briskly through the driving mists. He followed them. When they reached Slant Street they halted outside Bill Fix's house and talked together earnestly for awhile. Cowcross would have given an eye to overhear what passed between them; but the sacrifice would have been unnecessary, for when in the end both Marketer and the girl entered the house he felt that he divined its nature fully.

He waited in the wind and sleet until long past midnight, and still they did not come out. A light burnt in that room which his fancy

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had lately allotted to Deuce. Once he thought he discerned on the blind the faint outline of a woman's shadow.

Next day it was found that he had left Parker Crescent, and none knew his whereabouts. Marketer, on hearing the news, felt a certain sense of relief. But Judith had a sense of loss. His absence deprived her of a sure friend, left her terribly alone.

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A LAST dusty sunray quivered on the wall of the room. It was a chilly day, and it had rained drearily all morning. The dust in the roads were churned into mud, but the dust of the dry-rot in the gaunt, harsh buildings in Slant Street was rife as ever. There were bright jewels of moisture on the panes, starring their greasy iridescence and myriad flashing reflections in the unfathomable windows. The slashing noise of the rain having ceased, all outdoor sounds aggravated themselves into undue prominence; and side-walk conversations of an intimate nature which ought, in the interests of public morality, to have been kept secret, were blazoned on a sudden to the world. Within, there was a pungent smell of paraffin oil. A fire burnt on the dismantled hearth in an area of hectic radiance. The room was one of two on the first floor that Fix had given over to Marketer and the girl.

He lay sprawling on a big shabby sofa pushed back against the further wall. She sat by the

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window, plying her needle. The six short weeks of her daily association with Marketer had greatly changed her. She was visibly thinner. The light of her eyes had gone out. Her lips drooped pathetically at the corners. In the pose of her whole body there was expressed unmistakably a lassitude of mind as well as of limb. They had not spoken for nearly an hour; and he, having drunk deeply earlier in the day, was hovering on the confines of muddled sleep. A knock at the door roused them both.

"It's only me," said Fix, peeping in.

Marketer raised his rumpled head.

"No cloud without a silver lining," he growled. "Judy, go out an' fetch a fresh bottle o' brandy. Bill'll give you the money."

"But . . ." expostulated Fix.

"Best brandy, mind. None o' your 'air-oil an' turps. An' bring in some tommy, too. 'Ere, Bill, she wants a chicken or some'ing. Don't eat no more'n a canary."

"Get what you like, my dear," said Fix, slipping a half-sovereign into her hand.

"An' get what I like too an' all," added Marketer. "Now," he said, when the girl had gone, "we can talk sense."

"About the chat . . ." Fix began.

"O-ah! About the chat, o' course."

"I got it all set. Easy as shellin' peas."

"Always is," said Marketer, disdainfully.

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“ You shall judge for yourself, Chick. To begin with, it's up Muswell 'Ill way. Nice quiet neighbourhood that. The 'ouse stands by itself in its own grounds, which ain't extensive. There's a 'ouse opposite, but that's empty, an' not a single other one within a 'undred yards. The chat we're on is called The Observatory, an' it's got a sort o' tower stickin' out o' the roof.”

“ Put there o' purpose for me, I s'pose, so's I shouldn't make no bloomer.”

“ Very likely. . . . The owner's fitted this 'ere tower up with all manner o' scientific fake-ments—telescopes an' like that. 'E's an old man, an' barrin' that he 'as a woman in every day to do a bit o' scrubbin' an' so on, he lives all on his own. Eccentric old fellow, 'e is. An' any amount o' posh.”

“ Ow d'you know ? ”

Bill Fix drew from his pocket a tiny scrap of printed paper. “ Listen to this. Cut it out o' the *Mornin' Telephone*.” Then he read aloud slowly: “ Advances, £50 to £5000. At a few hours' notice. On note of hand alone. Apply direct to Actual Lender, Mr. J. Waverlea, The Observatory, Goose Lane, Muswell Hill, N.”

“ An' that's 'im ? ”

“ That's him.”

“ 'Ow d'you know ? ”

“ Sent one o' my neat young gen'l'men up there to borry a hundred. Negotiations un-

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accountably fell through. But I know 'e keeps no end o' bullion on the prems. An' I know where, too."

"Sounds all right," said Marketer. "When's it to be done?"

"To-night."

"Why to-night?"

"'Cos he draw'd out a thousand from the bank this mornin'."

"Straight griffin?"

"Straight as a plumb."

"Neat young gent agin, I s'pose?"

Fix grinned and nodded. "Best way to get in is through the conservatory at the side. Quite easy it is. It's built 'longside of a little room he uses as a office an' study. All you've got to do is to 'ide in there among the ferns an' things an' wait till the lights go out. He gen'ly does a bit o' writin' late at night. When he's done an' shut up all you 'ave to do is to walk in an' foller him up to 'is bedroom."

"Keeps the stuff in 'is bedroom, do 'e?"

"Well," drawled Fix, "I'm afraid 'e does."

"Nice job!" Marketer commented. "Easy as shellin' peas! I *don't* think." He spat into the fire, thoughtfully. "'Ow am I to get 'old o' the blunt if he goes to bed with it?"

"I expect it's kep' in a safe or a drawer or some'ing."

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“ Or tied round 'is neck, p'r'aps. An' if it's a safe it's bound to weigh about a ton.”

“ No, no. A bit 'eavy it might be. But look 'ow strong you are ! ”

This should have proved a shrewd touch ; for Marketer was inordinately proud of his strength ; but now he still seemed disposed to carp. “ Safe chained to the floor, o' course ? ” he said.

“ Might be.”

“ Neat young gent never said, I s'pose ? Or, if he did, you forgot. Lovely convenient sort o' memory yours ! ”

Fix eyed him keenly. “ What's the matter wi' you,” he demanded. “ Funk it ? ”

“ Me ? ”

“ Seem to want it all your own way, any'ow.”

“ I never,” said Marketer slowly, “ I never showed up white yet, an' I never will. But this 'ere is a pretty lively sort o' job to start on, ain't it ? An' me not out more'n seven weeks, an' the marks o' the irons still on me.”

“ 'Ave it or leave it, jest as you please. There's plenty'll be glad to take it on if you'd like some'ing more fancy. But I'd like to point out to you, Chick, that you've bin eatin' your 'ead off now an' playin' the brazen serpent wi' that there pore gel for longer'n I'm used to. It's time——”

“ I know it's time,” said Marketer, rising stiffly to his feet. “ An' I'm on right enough. On'y you're so sudden when you start.” He drained

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the rinsings of his glass on the table. "Got the bits an' things?"

Bill Fix's grey, wrinkled face mellowed instantly. "Tell you the truth, Chick," he said, confidentially, "I wouldn't like to trust nobody else wi' this 'ere chat, but you. A green 'and might think it a improvement to put it on the ole man, y'see, whereas you . . ."

"I bar that."

"So do I, Chick; so do I. Makes too much of a smoke, murder does."

"An' now about terms," said Marketer. I . . ."

The obstinate wrangle that ensued had hardly ended when Judith returned. She set down the bottle, wrapped in paper, on the table together with some small packets of grocery and some greasy parcels.

"But I say, Chick, go easy wi' this," said Bill Fix, touching the bottle. "Jest enough to screw you up, y'know, but not enough to split the grain. Judy, my dear, make a good supper. An'—an' look after him."

Winking with profound expression, he shuffled out of the room.

"What did he want to talk to you about, Chick?" asked Judith as the door swung to.

"Nothing," answered Marketer.

"Is that why you sent me out?"

"You shut your face," said her lover.

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She laughed and sat down on the edge of the table, with her legs dangling. "I know what it was," she said.

"All right, then. No more need to chew the fat about it."

"E's got a job for you to do."

She slipped down from the table to the floor, went up to him, and laid her hand on his sleeve.

"Don't take it on, Chick," she said. "Why should you? Why should you risk yourself for his benefit? Let him do a bit for a change. You won't get more'n 'alf you make at the most, I bet."

She gazed inquiringly into his face. It revealed plainly that he had agreed to accept even less than half.

"'E does all the plannin' an' that, y'know," said Marketer, awkwardly. "He's a mivvy at makin' things easy."

"For himself. No doubt o' that."

"I don't mean that way."

"Chick, you're a mug!" she exclaimed.

A brutal rejoinder was on his tongue. She saw the opening she had laid bare, and suddenly clapped her hand to his lips.

"Beg pardon, old cock," she said, with dismal playfulness. "I only meant you're a bit too devil-may-care an' all that, an' they take advantage of it. 'Tain't fair, that's all."

"I'm the best judge o' what's what," he replied.

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"But are you, Chick? Are you really? They do say, y'know, Chick, outsiders see most o' the game."

"Shut it 'fore I slide down it. Pour me out a livener."

"Yes, Chick." She did his bidding meekly, then replenished the fire and drew down the blinds. He sat sipping and smoking, and watched her as she moved about the room, with a look of satisfaction in his eyes. When at last she sat down and took up her needle-work he remarked gruffly: "You're not so dusty, after all, Judy."

Her eyes brimmed with tears of gratification. "No?" she queried, smiling and holding her head aslant in a bird-like way. Yet her small airs of coquetry were rather pathetic, too. Even Marketer seemed to perceive that, dimly. "You do like me a bit, then?"

"That 'd be tellin'," said he.

She rose, came round the table, and put her arms about his neck.

"Would you do some'ing to please me, ole dear?"

"Depends," said he suspiciously.

"P'r'aps it'd be more right if I said I only wanted you *not* to do some'ing."

"Brandy?"

"N-no."

She knelt on the floor and nestled up to him.

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"It's only . . ."

"Spit it out, gel."

"Don't do what Bill asks."

He pushed her away. "Wust o' women," he said bitterly. "Treat 'em kind an' they take libs."

"Oh, it isn't a liberty. I've a right to advise you, Chick. Ain't I? It's the same as if we was married. You said so. An' if I was your lawful wedded wife wouldn't you listen to me then?"

"Not if the pubs was open, I wouldn't."

She laid her cheek against his sleeve. "Don't do it," she pleaded desperately. "'Ow if they copped you! What 'd become o' me?"

"I see," he remarked unpleasantly. "Thinkin' o' yourself!"

"Yes," she answered. "But o' you most of all. Why can't we live honest? We'd be ever so much 'appier. An' you could easy get a job. Anybody that's bin in prison can be taken up by somebody or other, or some society, or some'ing. I know . . ."

"Would you kindly chuck it," said he.

"Won't you do nothing to please me then, Chick?"

"Sheckles!" said he contemptuously. "We ain't on the stage. I'd look fine, I would, carryin' the hod or wheelin' a truck. No, I couldn't stick that. I like to get my money in lumps,

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with a bit o' excitement thrown in an' all. I'd rather 'ave five quid down, once a year, to blue in a day if I felt like it, then thirty bob a week for life."

She nodded her head mournfully, as if she must perforce accept this just estimate of himself, though she would rather not.

"All right, Chick," she said. "I won't pester you no more."

"Good gel!" He stooped and kissed her carelessly. "'Tain't no use, y'know."

"I know it ain't no use," she admitted. "I knew that when I arst you."

SIXTEENTH CHAPTER

SPOILING A PHILISTINE

It was ten o'clock and a fine night when Marketer left Slant Street. He wore corduroy trousers, stained with lime and brick-dust, a coarse pilot jacket and waistcoat, and an old, battered felt hat with a cutty stuck in the band. He had straps fastened round his legs just below the knee ; he carried, slung over his shoulder, an old nut-bag of dried withes, such as honest workmen carry their tools in ; a tin tea-can poked its nozzle out of one of his side-pockets. He was indeed a faithful copy of a platelayer's labourer on night-duty.

He strode along northward through the thinning streets feeling pleasantly exhilarated. The crisp air seemed to scour off the rust from his inborn proclivities toward the life nefarious. His heart sang with joy in the nature of his adventure. There were stirring hours ahead, excitement, danger, the hope of abundant spoil to quicken him, and the added reward of enhanced self-respect accruing out of a triumphant issue.

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How regally he would ruffle it over his companions on his return. He would, for a time at least, be independent of Fix too, once more able to enjoy a dominion of violent self-assertion over that crafty old schemer. He had little doubt that he would be successful. He was no neophyte in burglary. Nor did he doubt his nerve, despite his long rest from participation in these illicit enterprises.

So he went on at a good round pace until he came to King's Cross, whence he took a ticket to Highgate.

Alighting from the train, he climbed up the steep path that leads to the station and emerged on the main road. He had not visited that suburb for twelve or fifteen years, and was not only surprised but a little daunted by its unfamiliar aspect. Where had been a rugged highway, flanked by rough raised side paths, he found a well-kept thoroughfare and neat pavements. The desolate plots of building land—where rubbish might not be shot, but was—had given place to imposing rows of thriving shops and new big houses. A regular service of spacious electric-tramcars had ousted the old ramshackle conveyances that had used to be the only vehicles plying for hire there. Even the ancient tree-embowered archway, which should have been plainly visible half a mile away, was gone. An iron bridge, painted green and yellow, crossed

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the road by a single span. And over all was the pallid flare of tall electric lamps. It was all very unlike the semi-rural district, splashed and shaded by plenteous boscage, dark and untravelled, that he had pictured in imagination. And he cursed Bill Fix comprehensively for that he had described the neighbourhood so misleadingly.

But his instructions were simple and concise. He turned sharply down the Muswell Hill Road, the woods upon his left hand showing black, with the feathered tops of the bare branches outlined against the resplendent sky. It was gloomy enough here. On his right hand steep side streets descended into unknown depths, showing clusters of bleared yellow gleams. Then they ceased and he held along between two stretches of hedge and tree. As he neared the house he had come to rifle, he felt his heart labouring in his breast and the hot blood surging to his head. He trembled a little, not from any nerveless qualm of fear, but because of the fierce exultation he had in the pursuit of his lawlessness. Oh, it was fine, on a moonlit night, when fluffy sleek citizens of credit and renown sloughed themselves in easeful, senseless sleep, to feel the pulses tingling and the veins running full with the wine of life! It was fine to rob and plunder, to prey upon these fat-witted, respectable boobies, who would, if they had their way (as they had it

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too often) consign such daring spirits as he, in all complacency, to the hulks! To spoil the Philistines! That was the zest of it, the jest of it! To break down their timid defences, to laugh to scorn their silly, feeble devices of lock and key, to set every flabby man-jack of them a-quiver with the echo of a midnight exploit! He had much of that feeling which poachers have voiced in numberless, lilting folk-songs. The romance of it! He regretted that he must go so scurvily, that he might not wear a terrifying mask or carry a gun and a bandolier. He envied, for a space, the fallen race of knights of the road. That sort of thing was degraded now into a vulgar, ignoble offence, punishable by whipping. It was very sad.

At last he saw right ahead the house that Bill Fix had described to him. It had been a fairly faithful description and the neat young gentleman was to be complimented. Marketer could see the tower blotting a silver dust of stars. The moon shone on the cupola, struck a pale refulgence from a latticed window-pane. A plashed fence surrounded the small demesne. There were young trees growing in the garden. He passed the big entrance and strode on for a hundred yards or so to assure himself that no one lurked near at hand to observe his doings.

Then he returned, put his two hands on the top of the gate and drew himself up. He saw

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a stretch of level sward and a dim lamp burning in a lower casement. But the blinds were drawn in that room. He dropped his bag upon the soft mould and swung himself after it, lightly. Then he crouched in the shadow of some shrubs and listened. Was there a dog? He upbraided himself for not having thought to ask Fix that. Dogs were the very devil. He waited for a full minute, then got upon his hands and knees and began to crawl toward the house. He headed straight for the conservatory, plain enough in the misty blue twilight, its glass roof shimmering like water.

Spreading out his hands and drawing them together as a swimmer does he pushed on, cautiously feeling his way over the cold grass lest he should encounter some man-trap. He encountered none, but won safely to the shelter of that wall against which the conservatory was built. It was a small conservatory, and he could look through it into the room beyond.

In that room the lamp burned. It stood upon a big office-table, provided with a roll-top, and furnished with many drawers and pigeon-holes. There were heaps of papers piled upon it, bundles of legal documents, docketed letters, files for receipts and invoices. At the table sat the money-lender, an old man of a ruddy complexion, his face set in an aureole of snow-white hair. A crest of stiff locks fell forward over his forehead,

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shading his thin, hooked features and lending to his countenance the look of a bird of prey. He was writing busily in a slim, narrow book. Marketer, peering in between the broad leaves of a dwarf palm, wondered how long the old man would be before he made an end.

But the minutes spun their slow coil, and still he did not stir. Marketer grew cold. Cramping pains shot through his limbs. The mould on which he knelt was damp, and he could feel the dampness soaking into his flesh, numbing his very blood.

At last the old man finished his writing, wiped his pen carefully, closed his ink-pot, pushed back his chair with a grating sound. His deliberation was maddening. He got upon his feet and pulled down the roll-top over the littered table. Then he locked each drawer, and tugged at the handles to make sure they were all secure. Finally, he put out the lamp, lit a tall candle, and, holding it high above his head, moved slowly toward the door.

Marketer heard him fumbling with the outer fastenings, and grinned sardonically as he reflected on the ineptitude of prudent householders. When the rattling of chains and bolts had ceased, he rose and commenced operations.

First, he took from his bag a mass of soft putty which he moulded into the shape of a mushroom. He affixed the spreading part of the mushroom to one of the panes. Then he drew a rough

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circle round it on the glass with a glazier's diamond, and gave the putty a quick, sharp tug. The disc of glass came away, sticking tightly to the mushroom. He detached it and laid it down gently. Then he inserted his arm through the hole, unhooped the bar, drew the bolt and slipped the chain out of its groove. The key still remained in the lock. He turned it from the outside by means of a pair of fine, strong tweezers, and the door was open. He passed at once into the conservatory, lit his dark lantern with a silent match, and groped his way among the plants to the money-lender's office window, which was of the French kind. He had only to thrust back the spring catch with a thin, strong putty knife and throw the two panes open. He did this swiftly, noiselessly, climbed over the sill, and was in the house.

Using a bunch of skeleton keys, he unlocked each drawer and ransacked it ; but found nothing to reward him. Then he raised the roll top and turned out the pigeon-holes. They yielded not a single doit nor any smallest article of marketable value. There was a set of shelves in the room, laden with dusty, musty tomes. He had no time to examine these books systematically. He took them in his hands, one after another, held them by the covers and shook them. Only a few loose leaves fluttered out and circled down upon the carpet.

SPOILING A PHILISTINE

Thus far he had gained nothing for his pains. He decided to explore the house further. He crept to the room door and opened it silently. He listened. There was no sound. Probably the old man was already sleeping in his lofty bed-chamber. He stepped out into the passage, and cast his light over the walls and up the stairway. There was one other door in the basement. He tried it and found that it was merely latched — which indicated that it contained nothing of much intrinsic worth. He was hesitating between the advisability of entering that unguarded door or ignoring it and boldly proceeding to the upper storeys when he heard a sound from above that transfixed him. He closed the slide of the lantern and stood motionless.

The sound continued. It was impossible to be in two minds as to its nature. Some one was coming downstairs slowly, but steadily and surely as with an accustomed tread. He saw the polished rail of an upper baluster gleam suddenly in a wavering glimmer of light. In a moment the old man would reach the landing; the rays of his candle would flood the passage, and Marketer would stand revealed. It was likely the old man had heard some suspicious sound, and, coming to investigate its cause, would be prepared for an encounter. Marketer hesitated no more, but pushed open the unguarded door

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and entered the room beyond. There he waited against the wall.

The footsteps approached. A flickering light swept along the passage.

Presently a voice quavered out, "Anybody there?"

Now Marketer, inveighing bitterly against the old man's gameness, began to perceive that the time was come for him to act promptly, if he would not be trapped. He formed his plan of escape in an instant. No longer had he thoughts of booty. To get away, that was enough. To get away before the long tentacles of justice stretched out to wind their coils about him and engulf him in their womb again. The old man might raise an alarm at any moment. . . He resolved to rush out, bowl him over by sheer weight of metal, and make a dash for the garden. It seemed the only way.

He flung back the door with a crash and sprang out into the passage. He had a brief vision of the money-lender in trousers and shirt, carrying in one hand a candle, in the other a glittering Something that shook in his palsied clutch. He heard a husky, strangled screech, and then a deafening report that seemed to blot out all things. He had a sensation in his left arm as if he had been struck by some heavy, soft missile, such as a bolster. Then he felt the whole weight of the old man's body precipitated

SPOILING A PHILISTINE

violently upon him. Tough, sinuous fingers were wound in his hair through the soft felt of his hat. And all the while there arose such a hideous bellowing that Marketer was half-dazed by the shrill outcry. Recovering his wits, in an access of terror he struck up savagely with his right fist at that point in the darkness where he adjudged his assailant's face to be. His knuckles met the hard bone of teeth and the gristle of a lean nose. The grip on him was relaxed. There was the heavy crash of a limp body falling to the concrete flooring.

But still the old man cried out.

To Marketer it seemed that the air was filled with answering voices. In a panic-stricken frenzy he fell upon the writhing form at his feet. His injured left arm swung loosely at his side, and the hand clapped smartly against the old man's cheek. It was at once gripped and held and wrenched till a sweat of agony poured down the face of Marketer. He could not restrain a dull groan. Again he struck with his right fist, reaching the angle of the old man's jaw. Then, blinded with fury and driven half insane by his unspeakable anguish, he seized on the other's leathery throat, lifted high his head again and again, and dashed it down on the hard concrete with all the might of his lusty arm.

Suddenly a giddiness overcame him, so that he reeled against the wall. For a brief space his

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senses forsook him ; then he rallied, and staggered up, desperate only for flight.

The house was now full of a dread stillness. It was as if a great clamour had abruptly died. Somewhere a clock ticked loudly, monotonously, in the all-encompassing darkness. Marketer, smitten with bewildered horror, arising as much from the pain he suffered as from an overwhelming consciousness of his parlous plight, whimpered as he stood swaying there like a frightened child. At all hazards he must have a light. He pushed back the slide of his lantern. And the first object that its narrow ray revealed was the face of the old money-lender, grey and hard as wind-flayed granite, save where it was smeared red. Shuddering, he averted his gaze. He stumbled into the study, his bag still slung over his shoulder. He climbed the sill clumsily, staggered through the conservatory, overturning a heavy flower-pot as he passed, and so attained the garden. One coat sleeve was hot and wet ; the limp limb within it seemed to weigh him down ; it felt so huge and heavy. He went at a faltering run across the turf, flung open the gate and fled up the road.

For a mile he held doggedly on his course, until he reached that part of the Muswell Hill Road which is bordered by a belt of wood. Then a great numbness and nausea assailed him. Feebly he scaled the easy fence and stumbled into the unfathomable shadow of the trees.

SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER

MARKETER'S RETURN

JUDITH kept a lonely vigil. It was drawing on toward four o'clock. The fire had died down in the flaking grate till only a few dull embers remained. She shivered as she sat there in the spreading rays of the lamp, and drew her shawl closer about her. She had not slept, nor even sought her bed, foreseeing the futility of any attempt to find a respite in slumber from her manifold cares and anxieties. But now, at last, she began to doze for very weariness. Her chin sank down upon her breast. The needlework with which she had tried to engage her thoughts fell from her hand to the floor. The little clock upon the wall ticked off the minutes busily.

A slight noise aroused her. She had been dreaming of some formless horror the nature of which she forgot in the very moment of her awakening. She still was troubled, however, by a certain dull feeling of oppression which the passing dream had engendered. She sat erect in her chair and listened.

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Some one had just entered the house. She could hear blundering footsteps sounding in the passage below. She ran to the door, opened it, and peered down over the banisters.

“That you, Chick?”

There was no reply. The footsteps came steadily up the stairs. But so slowly that her joy in the return of her lover was suddenly quenched by misgiving. Usually, Marketer's movements were by no means laboured or deliberate. . . . And why did he not answer her? She ran back into the room and fetched the lamp. By that time he had passed the first landing, and she could see him plainly.

He had somehow got rid of the bag with which he had started out, though in all other respects, save one, he looked the honest, home-coming labourer to the life. The second omission from his outfit was, however, an even more startling one. He wore no hat. Thus his face was clearly visible to her at once.

He was deadly pale. His forehead was knotted into puckers. The lines in his cheeks were scored deep by pain so that they marked his flesh as with black streaks. His upper teeth showed strangely, protruding over his lower lip. He gazed at Judith with dull eyes that seemed not to perceive her rightly.

“Chick!” she whispered, the lamp swaying wildly in her hand.

MARKETER'S RETURN

The protruding teeth disappeared as he gasped, "All right," and a thin red thread ran down his chin.

She drew him into the room. As she stretched her hand toward him, "Mind my arm!" he cried. It was held close to the side of his coat, with the hand thrust into his pocket.

Filled with fear, she shut the door and put the lamp back on the table. He stood gazing vacantly about him, then dropped down in an arm-chair.

"Pull down the blinds . . . Oh, they *are* down," he said. "An' bring me some'ing to drink. I want it."

She poured out a glassful of brandy and held it to his lips.

"'Ow you shake," he said. "Anybody'd think you . . . What's that?"

"Nothing, dear."

"I tell you . . ."

"It was only the wind."

"Was it?" he muttered. "Damn clever wind!"

As she stood holding the half-emptied glass, she grew slowly aware of a rank odour in the room that seemed to emanate from him.

"Why, your coat is all wet!" she exclaimed, "you're bleedin'!"

"I fancy it's about stopped now," he said, looking at his sopped sleeve with oddly fixed intensity.

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"You're 'urt, Chick."

"Ah!" he said. "Arm's broke, I think. I can't do nothing with it."

He spoke with marked difficulty, enunciating each word slowly and very precisely. His gaze wandered aimlessly from object to object, now lighting on her face, now striving to make out a distant corner of the room, again falling to the floor and ranging there, as if he had dropped something but knew not what. And all the while his face bore an expression of dull perplexity, his eyes sought hers as if in appeal. The pathos of his helplessness flooded her eyes with hot moisture.

"Dear ole boy!" she murmured. "What is it? What 'as 'appened?"

She knelt down beside him and put her arms about his neck.

"That's right," he said softly. "I like you to be close to me." Then he began to shudder and to tremble. "Drop more o' that," he whispered, nodding toward the bottle. He passed his hand over the crown of his head. "I say, where's my 'at?" he demanded. "My 'at, y'know. Where is it?"

"You came in without it, dear."

"It belongs to Bill, that 'at does. That 'at don't belong to me at all," he mumbled foolishly. "It's Bill's 'at."

He made an attempt to rise from the low chair.



MARKETER'S RETURN

"Chick, what are you goin' to do?" she said.

He was alternately rubbing his head and staring at his hand in a witless way that pinched her heart.

"Sit down, dear," she implored him.

"I ought to go an' find that 'at," he said.

"It's only an old 'un, dear."

"Very likely. But it 'ad a cutty stuck in it."

Reluctantly he permitted her to force him back into the chair.

"Let me get you to bed," said she. "I'll 'elp you off wi' your things. An' you'd be more comfortable so."

Gently she removed his outer garments, though he winced once or twice and groaned faintly despite her tender care. Then she gave him her shoulder to lean on and led him to his bed. When he was between the sheets she asked him: "Shall I just look at your pore arm? P'r'aps it 'ud ease it to bathe it an' tie it up."

"If you like," he said indifferently, and closed his eyes.

She cut away his shirt-sleeve and laid bare the broken limb. It was smeared from wrist to shoulder with dry brown stains. She poured out some water into a basin and laved it with a piece of flannel. He shivered at the cold contact, but submitted to her ministrations docilely enough. The bullet had entered the flesh just



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above the elbow and passed out again at the back of his arm a few inches lower. The two wounds were quite small and not very terrible to look upon. When she had cleansed away the congealed blood, she bound up his arm tightly between two bundle-of-wood sticks. All this deftly, as she had seen prize-fighters dress a limb after one of the faction-fights that were common in the neighbourhood of Slant Street. Then she made a sling and passed it round his neck.

"Ah!" he sighed, and settled down among the pillows.

She watched beside him until he fell asleep. . . .

She went back to the front room and examined his clothes. Coat, vest, and trousers alike were spotted and spattered with gouts of blood. There was blood on his boots also. She blanched and sickened as she hid the tell-tale garments under a heap of waste-paper and firewood in one of the cupboards.

For more than an hour she waited whilst her lover slept on. Then she tip-toed out of the room and crept upstairs. She knocked at the door of Bill Fix's sleeping apartment. He called out from his bed, "Who is it?"

"Me. Judy," she answered.

"What's the matter?"

"I want to speak to you."

"G'out. It's only the middle o' the night. Go to bed an' rest till he comes 'ome."

MARKETER'S RETURN

"'E's come 'ome a'ready. It's about 'im. . ."

She heard the thud of his bare feet on the boards. "Good!" he was chuckling. "Bright boy. Back, eh? That's fine! . . . 'Ow 'as he done, ole dear?" he asked her.

She was so incensed by the old man's ignorant self-complacency that she replied, viciously, "Bad as 'ell. 'E's bin shot."

"Shot!"

The door was flung open instantly, and he stood before her, clad only in his night wear.

"Dress yourself an' come downstairs," she said.

"But, Judy . . ."

She gave him no further heed, but returned straightway to her lover's bedside.

Bill Fix soon joined her, looking woefully aged and withered and grey in that same big frieze ulster he had bought on the day of Marketer's emancipation.

He gazed on the stricken, sleeping figure.

"Where's 'e 'urt?"

"In the arm."

"Lord! Lord!" quavered the old receiver.

"Whatever can he 'ave got up to? Tell me, Judy, when he come 'ome an' all about it—quick."

She told him in a few words.

"'E was interfered with, that was it," he muttered, when she had made an end. "Lord.

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I 'ope he wasn't recognised. Looks as if there must ha' bin a chase, though . . . him losin' his 'at an' the bag o' tools an' all. Blessin' they can't trace him by *them*. Might belong to anybody, they might. I was careful 'bout that. Wust thing of all was his startin' from this 'ouse. I never ought to ha' let him stop 'ere one day arter he come out, properly." He brooded with a sickly face, fingering his chin. "Why!" he shrilled, suddenly, "if they've seen him they'll 'ave me as well." He seemed not to have quite realised this at first. He uttered a moan of dismay at the thought, and clutched at his scanty hair. "See what I mean, Judy?" he wailed, gripping her by the arm. "See what I mean?"

"You only think o' yourself," she said, scornfully. "What do I care whether you're caught or not? It's about your turn, ain't it? 'E's 'ad 'is!"

EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER

THE NEXT TWENTY-FOUR HOURS

THE morning broke, clear and bright with promise of fine weather.

Toward ten o'clock the charwoman who came each day to set the old money-lender's house in order pushed open the gate and went up the garden path toward the house. She saw, lying on the grass, an old soft hat, battered and dirty, with a black cutty tucked inside the band. She picked it up, sodden with dew, and tossed it over the hedge into the road with a snort of extreme disgust. Then she knocked at the front door.

"Gets slower every day, he does," she remarked, when some minutes had passed and there was no answer. "And I s'pose if I knocks agin I'll get my nose snapped off. 'Owever . . ." She knocked again.

She knocked several times with ever-increasing emphasis, and still with no tangible result.

"Up in that there old tower of his, I lay," was her conclusion.

She waddled round to the side of the house

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and found the conservatory door open. That was not surprising in itself, for her master often chose to go into the garden by that way. But when she entered and discovered that one of precious pots of ferns had been overturned and smashed, and that the French window leading to the study was thrown wide open, she had a sudden feeling of alarm. Nor did the aspect of the study tend to allay that feeling. The floor was strewn with empty drawers and broken-backed books, snowed-up amid innumerable papers. On some of them were round, red splashes and the heavy impress of boots. She stood amid this chaotic ruin with wide eyes and gaping mouth, pale to the roots of her sleek black hair, her hands raised to her temples. But she was a woman of considerable hardihood, and, though she was greatly afraid, still she pushed on into the passage.

There she found the body of the old money-lender. He lay flat upon his back with his arms outspread, his blood-dabbled face stark and ghastly in a sunray streaming down through the fanlight. She reeled slightly on beholding this ghastly spectacle, then dropped the bag she carried and knelt down beside the stiff figure. One touch of his hand satisfied her that he was dead.

Now there is credit due to Mrs. Belcher, the charwoman, for her subsequent action. She left

THE NEXT TWENTY-FOUR HOURS

the corpse where it lay, retraced her steps through the study and the conservatory, across the garden and out of the gate, and looked for the hat with the pipe in it. It lay in the gutter where it had fallen. The cutty had slipped out of the band and been shattered to fragments. These possibly incriminating morsels of black clay she gathered up carefully, deposited them in the hat, bore them back into the house, and placed them on the roll-topped writing-table.

Then she sallied out again and strode off in search of a policeman. She had to go a quarter of a mile before she found one, and he was young and foolish, at first suspecting her of playing some prank upon him, or of being the victim of a feminine delusion. For to a constable of only one month's standing a murder case must always appear at first blush altogether too good to be true. It was at her suggestion that they called on a surgeon on their way back, and brought him along with them too.

They re-entered the house of tragedy.

The young officer entered in his virgin notebook details of the murdered man's appearance and the general disposition of the house, whilst the surgeon examined the body. The possible causes of death were compound fracture of the skull and strangulation. "But in the latter case," the surgeon said, "the fellow who did it must have been uncommonly strong."

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little further investigation revealed the pistol with one barrel discharged and a tell-tale red spatter which showed that the old man had winged his assailant. It was the surgeon who advised the young constable, delirious with self-importance, to send at once to the local police-station and get them to communicate with headquarters. Mrs. Belcher, with pardonable pride, then exhibited the hat and the broken pipe. The doctor commended her discrimination ; but the young constable was disposed to be contemptuous of this "clue," describing it as "irreverent."

Within half an hour other constables, another doctor, and two detectives arrived at the house, whilst without, in the semi-rural street, a crowd congregated. One or two reporters of a vulturine scent also appeared, ravening for horrors. By noon there was a paragraph in the stop-press column of every evening newspaper in London telling of the discovery of the crime.

So the day passed. By nightfall the public sheets all contained two full columns of more or less accurate "descriptive matter." The bag containing the tools had been found by some boys in the woods hard by, inferentially proving the murderer to have been a burglar. The police authorities, it was stated, hoped shortly to effect an arrest, as they had already a sure clue to the identity of the guilty party.

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Bill Fix and Judith, surrounded by newspapers, read these reports aloud to one another in the room above the sweet-stuff shop. The old receiver seemed to have aged ten years since the morning. Judith's face was drained of every vestige of colour and void of all expression as a death mask. Marketer still lay in bed, sleeping. He had waked once during the day, and had drunk a basin of broth greedily. His slumbers were troubled, he tossed and chattered huskily.

"What shall we do? Lord, what shall we do?" was the old receiver's ceaseless plaint, as he rocked to and fro on his chair. "Never 'ad nothing like this ever 'appen before. Never. Always drew the line at that, I did. Always, an' 'e said he did, too."

"I don't believe Chick killed the ole man," Judith maintained stoutly. But her heart was not in the words, for she knew the impetuous temper of her lover, and how like him it would be to wreak this mad reprisal in the hot rage and smart of his injury.

"That's only baby talk," snarled Fix. "Who done it if he never? No good blinkin' facts. An' even s'posin' it was as you say, what would that matter if he swung?"

"God!" cried the girl. "Don't talk like that."

He got up and ambled about the room.

"A doctor'll 'ave to be fetched to him," said

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Judith, after a heavy pause. "His arm's broken an' ought to be set. Besides, he's a bit off his 'ead."

"Mad you must be!" exclaimed Fix. "Doctor! Why, 'e'd see the bullet 'oles. They know the man's bin shot. They know what sort Chick is too. Him only just out o' quod an' all, an' wi' sech a reputation for violence. G-r-r-r! If you want to 'ang 'im straight away—an' get me lagged an' yourself as well—why, go an' call in a doctor at once. Otherwise . . ."

"But 'e might die."

"Yes, he might, though I don't think it. But, then 'e'd be sure to die—an' no 'might' about it—if the doctor laid a information agin him, as, o' course, 'e'd be bound to do, if only for the sake o' the advertisement he'd get."*

"What ought we to do, then?"

"Nothing," said Fix, "'cept keep close an' lay low till we see 'ow things is goin'."

"'Ush!" whispered the girl. "He's wakin' up."

"Judy," wheezed the voice from the bed.

"Well, ole cock," she said, going to him.

But he only continued to stare at her.

"Who's that keeps bobbin' about over there in the dark?" he asked presently.

"Only Bill."

* Here Mr. Fix betrayed his ignorance of medical etiquette.

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"It's only me," said Fix, slipping into the light. "'Ow you feelin', Chick?"

"Damn bad," groaned Marketer. "My arm weighs a ton an' a half an' feels hotter'n that ole 'ell what Cowcross used to frighten you with, Judy. Gimme a drink."

"Water?" she faltered.

"Brandy," he said brusquely. "That muddles me like."

He drained the glass and then lay still, his sound arm outside the coverlet, his hand clutching Judith's tightly. Bill Fix, circling bat-like about the room, drew nearer and nearer. At last he brought up at the foot of the bed, leaned over the rail and gazed steadily at Marketer.

"'Ow goes it now?" he asked nervously.

"Oh, go an' scrape yourself," was the irritable reply.

"Chick," said Fix after a pause, "we bin readin' the papers, me an' Judy."

"Awful dry they are," she remarked quietly.

"Nothing in 'em at all."

Marketer glanced from him to her with a darkling gleam in his full, bright eyes. Then he dragged his hand loose, rolled over painfully and turned his face to the wall.

"Light sort o' dazzles me," he said thickly.

The girl's face blazed with mute fury as she turned swiftly upon the old receiver, who stood there mumbling his jaws and blinking.

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Hot words were on her lips, but she stifled them.

"When Judy says now as there's nothing in the papers," said Fix, speaking very slowly, "she means . . . Well, I don't think she could ha' read all of 'em p'r'aps."

"'E don't want to be worried by a lot o' jabber," said the girl. "Do you, Chick?"

"Let him go on," said Marketer. "It seems to amuse one of us."

Fix, thus encouraged, continued. "That there 'ouse at Muswell 'Ill . . . You know the one I mean, Chick. . . . They got an account o' it's bein' broke into last night."

The form outlined under the sheets stirred slightly.

"The ole bloke livin' there—money-lender an' star-gazer 'e was, it appears—'e's . . . well, 'e's dead."

"Dead, eh!" uttered a strained voice that was not in the least like the voice of the house-breaker.

"'M . . . Murdered, they say."

"Oh, my God!" groaned Marketer.

He sat up quite suddenly and faced them. His eyes were dry, but the face he showed was a weeping face.

"You, Bill . . . what d'you mean?" he panted. "That ole man . . .!"

He dropped back on the pillow.



"Chick," said Fix after a pause, "we bin readin' the papers, me an' Judy"

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Fix could no longer contain his whetted eagerness for information.

"But you were careful, Chick, weren't you?" he asked, speaking rapidly, breathlessly now. "They don't know who done it? Nobody see you? Chick, tell me about it." He caught up one of the newspapers. "They say 'ere they got a clue an'll soon lay 'ands on you."

"On me?" Marketer cried, and his voice had suddenly grown steady.

"On the man that's wanted, I mean. They've found 'is 'at an' his bag o' tools. 'An the ticket-collector at 'Ighgate says . . ."—his volubility choked him—" 'e was shot in the arm, Chick."

"'Ow do they know it was in the arm? Anybody'd think, to 'ear you talk, bullets in the arm was catchin'."

"O Chick," Fix implored him, "what's the use——?"

"One thing," said Marketer sturdily, "I'm glad I wasn't in the neighbourhood. I'm glad, if anybody calls an' asks any questions, that I can say, with a honest 'eart, I never left this room all night, bein' too ill."

"But the arm, Chick?"

"Got it broken in a dream," he said, lowering his prickly brows. "'Ere, Judy, read out the 'ole thing to me."

"You want me to?"

"Shouldn't arst you if I never."

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She took one of the newspapers and read aloud the long "written-up" account, of the discovery of the body, the nature of the injuries, what Mrs. Belcher said, what the neighbours had not heard nor seen during the night, and all the rest of it.

"There's a picture of the 'ouse, an' portraits o' the dead man an' Mrs. Belcher, an' a lot more."

"Let me see 'em," he said.

He considered the rude cuts carefully, critically. "Awful ugly lot," he remarked. "Any more 'orrers to tell me about? . . . Then I'll 'ave another snooze."

He drew the sheets over his head.

Fix made an angry, impotent gesture of the hands. He lingered a while yet, staring at the figure on the bed, moodily. Then he withdrew.

The door had scarce closed behind him when Marketer threw back the bed-clothes.

"Thank God the ole harpy's gone," he said.

He was trembling pitifully, twittering with uncontrollable fear. The sweat hung in beads on his forehead and high cheekbones so that they shone in the light. His thick dark hair was lank and clotted.

"Judy, 'old my 'and," he said, hardly uttering the words, but rather mouthing them dumbly. "I feel as if I should float away, Judy. Judy, I'm afraid. I never bin like this before. . . ."

THE NEXT TWENTY-FOUR HOURS

'Fore God, Judy, I never meant to kill him. . . .
'Eaven knows I never! . . . 'E shot me, an'
I didn't think. It hurt. I was savage. . . .
My God, my God! . . . O Judy!"

"Dear! . . . dear!" she crooned.

"Arterwards," he muttered, dragging her down, so that her cheek touched his; "arterwards, all among them trees, it was so horrible. You dunno . . . 'Tain't bein' took I care about so much, Judy. It's knowin' about it all. When I was asleep just now I thought I was back in the old cell; an' I was that 'appy. . . . You won't ruck on me, Judy?"

She kissed him, glad, in spite of his danger, to have him in this softened mood if only for a few brief minutes. Her lips were cold and firm; but his were hot and loose, tremulous and clinging as a crying child's.

Thus they stayed for an uncounted hour.

NINETEENTH CHAPTER

DEUCE SEEKS A FRIEND, BUT ENCOUNTERS HIS FATHER

MEANWHILE, Deuce stayed on peacefully in the house of the old maid. And nothing of moment happened to him. Christmas being near at hand, Miss Ivy, in consultation with Mr. Gandy, had determined that her dear boy should not go to school until the beginning of the New Year term. She defended this decision on the grounds of economy and expediency. But she was at heart only too pleased to keep him with her every hour for as long as possible.

So Deuce spent his days in idleness, and found it rather dull.

On a certain sunny afternoon, whilst strolling in the High Street accompanied by Snuff, he was smitten with a great longing to see Peter Cowcross again. In the general dislocation of his affairs, consequent on his flight, he had at first given little thought to that unsatisfactory world from which he had lately escaped. But as he grew strong once more, and the new life began to

DEUCE SEEKS A FRIEND

lose somewhat of its novelty, the ties of former associations tugged ever more insistently at his heart-strings.

"It would be fine to see ole dad an' 'ave a chow," he said to himself. "I'll go."

But, having made up his mind, the problem of Snuff remained. Deuce could not walk all the way to Parker Crescent and return again in time to save Miss Ivy anxiety; and the dog could not ride. There was only one course to follow.

"Home, you!" he said, with an imperious wave of the hand. "Go on, ole fat!"

Snuff blinked wistful eyes at him, wagged a pathetic tail, then turned slowly and slunk away. Deuce stood and watched him until he disappeared round a corner, at every sign of mutiny shaking a threatening fist. Then he climbed on to the top of a passing omnibus.

But he had not ridden the distance of a furlong before, chancing to gaze idly over the painted rail, he saw Snuff trotting stolidly through the mud, well abreast of the horses. The dog gazed up, espied him, and barked. As it was too late then to send him back, Deuce having already paid his fare, he put a good face on the matter and beguiled the journey very pleasantly in loud, spirited conversation with his sorry-looking pet.

It was diverting to watch Snuff. For there never was a more well-intentioned, wrong-headed creature, nor one with such a big share of luck.

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Rapt in contemplation of his master's face, he blundered into all sorts of dangers and difficulties, and blundered out of them again with a sublime unconsciousness of anything having gone wrong at all that was wondrous piquant. The victim of a too-hasty conclusion, he would sometimes run on ahead and take a false turning; then, discovering his mistake, he would double on his tracks so impetuously that he carried devastation and panic into small groups of children encamped upon the pavement. One hopscotch party he quite demoralised and left in a state of bitter disruption by causing the lady with the piece of china on her toe to drop both feet to the ground. And he picked up undesirable acquaintances, so that at one time a retinue of some six variously assorted curs trailed away in his wake, and made it a dangerous matter for the conductor to hop down from his platform. When the omnibus stopped, his vaulting ambition underleapt itself in vain endeavours to scale the roof. Small talk between the conductor and policemen was invariably complicated by his prying interest in the merits of their dispute. And he grew muddier and muddier until his legs and the under-parts of his body were hardly distinguishable from the colour of the road, so that in the gathering gloom he seemed but the ghost of a dog's back. Two old political antagonists became reconciled by his agency, each being so keenly

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aware of Snuff's weird humours that he must point them out to the other. Even the driver proved himself to be merely human by shouting huskily at intervals : " I lay on the field. Four to one on the field bar one ! I bar Fullerton."

So they came to Westminster Bridge, and Deuce alighted.

He hurried at once to Parker Crescent. It looked rather dingier than he had expected it to : the railway-arch seemed blacker and grimier, the aroma of the mews more overwhelming, the mingled odours of soapsuds and scorched linen more pronounced than formerly. It gave him a slight shock to find the old shop closed and shuttered ; but he instantly concluded that his " dad " was absent on one of his many self-appointed missions, and so he was not much downcast. He went into an adjoining laundry, seeking information.

" 'Ere, take that dog out," said the fat-armed proprietress on catching sight of Snuff, " or he'll be muddyin' the things." Then she recognised Deuce. " It's you, is it ? " she said.

" Yes," he replied, unnecessarily. " Be funny if it wasn't me."

" Thought you was dead," she said. " Where you bin ? "

" Stayin' wi' friends."

" Shootin'-party ? "

" Not exactly," said he, gracefully accepting

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her banter. Then he asked, "When will my dad be back, d'you think?"

"Arst me another," she replied. "Ain't seen him now for . . . let me see . . . must be . . . Poll!"

"What?" demanded a figure, dimly visible through steam.

"Ole Cowcross?"

"Well?"

"'Ow long since 'e 'ooked it?"

"Two months come next Tuesday."

This the proprietress interpreted to Deuce as, "Seven weeks an' four days."

"Get out!" said Deuce, with a sinking heart.

"Might be a minute or two short o' the complete four days. I don't fancy he left till the We'n'sday mornin' myself. But that's as near as makes no matter. What did you come for? To pay his washin' bill? Poll, when did ole Cowcross 'ave that clean shirt?"

"Easter," came the terse reply.

"But I say," said Deuce, "ain't he ever comin' back?"

"'Ope so, for the sake o' my threepence-ha'p'ny." Then she abated her flippant asperity. "It's a mystery. Nobody ain't the least idea what's become of him. We've 'ad all manner of religious riff-raff round 'ere makin' inquiries. An' nothing's come of it."

*Deuce was at a loss. To him Cowcross had

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seemed as much a part of Parker Crescent as its odour and its dirt.

"Thank you," he said, feeling rather desolate and much subdued.

"Might try Bedlam," suggested the laundress. "Likely place as any."

Deuce strode away with his head in the air, indignantly.

He had already decided on his next step. He would go and see Judith. But he found that she had left her lodging. Then, in desperation, he made up his mind to call at the sweet-stuff shop and interview Bill Fix. If he encountered his father . . . He hardly knew what he should do in that event, but, with the inbred fatalism of his class, "I'll risk it any'ow," said he.

Although the twilight was now far advanced, and the lamps were dotting the streets with flecks of yellow, he found the sweet-stuff shop still dark within. But the door yielded to his touch, and the bell tinkled dolorously as of old. He stood in the dusky interior, and presently heard footsteps coming downstairs slowly.

"All right, sonny," said the voice of Fix. "You stay there a minute an' I'll get a light."

"It's me, Bill," said Deuce.

"An' who's 'me'?"

"Deuce."

"Why, so it is, so it is," cried Fix, peering closely into his face. "Whatever did you want

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to come 'ere for ? ” He stumbled over Snuff. “ Lord ! ” he exclaimed, sharply, “ what’s that ? ”

“ Only my dog,” said Deuce.

Fix struck a match and lit the lamp.

“ ‘Sh ! ” he whispered. “ Don’t talk too loud.”

“ Is ‘e upstairs, then ? ”

“ Eh ? Yes. Lord, what did you want to come ‘ere for ? ”

Deuce gazed at the old man in dumb surprise : the change in him was so startling. His former suave habit of speech and manner had dropped from him like a worn-out disguise. He appeared somehow to have assumed a reptilian aspect as he stood there regarding the boy with shifty eyes and bent head. He seemed incredibly older, more shrunken, smaller.

“ What is it ? What do you want ? ” he repeated peevishly.

“ About my dad ? ”

“ Cowcross ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ I dunno nothing ‘bout him. What should I know,” said Fix. “ You’d better go away.”

“ What’s the matter ? What’s ‘appened ? ” asked Deuce.

“ Nothing,” replied Fix, still speaking in an undertone. “ Now, ‘ere’s a customer. I tell you, you’d better clear out.”

“ Shan’t,” said Deuce flatly. “ Not until . . . ”

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He withdrew to a corner of the shop whilst Fix, trembling visibly, attended the grubby little maid who had just entered.

"No, it's Imperial drops I want," said the girl, rejecting the package he handed to her.

"No Imperial drops left. These are ever so much better, my dear," quavered Fix.

"I see some in the winder, I did. 'Eaps," persisted the exigent one.

"Damn!" muttered Fix.

"Left 'and side," she directed him, imper-
turbably.

Still muttering, he stretched for the desired confections, the child watching him closely in a pouncing attitude. The sweetmeats were stuck to the tin tray, and the tin tray had got wedged among other trays. Fix made a considerable clatter in his impatient eagerness to serve and get rid of his definitely-minded customer. Under cover of this mimic din, Marketer, who had been listening on the landing above, came softly downstairs and entered the shop.

Deuce saw him enter, and at once darted toward the door. But his father swooped down on him and gripped him by the shoulder.

"What . . . ?" he cried hoarsely, twisting Deuce around so that he could see his face. "You, is it!"

Deuce uttered a shrill squeal. Snuff barked angrily.

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"Get out!" growled Marketer, aiming a heavy kick at the dog, whereat the dog growled too. A second kick smote it in the small ribs. It yelped, turned tail, and fled from the shop.

"Chick!" cried Fix. "What the blazes are you at?"

"You 'old your mag," said Marketer.

The grubby little girl gathered up her purchase and departed in haste. Marketer still held Deuce fast.

"So you 'ave come back," he remarked grimly. "Clobbered up nice and gay an' all, too. Where you bin?"

"You leave me be," said Deuce faintly but doughtily.

"Better let him go," Fix whispered. "What's the use . . .?"

"Wants a bit o' thinkin' over, that does," was Marketer's rejoinder. "Fust, I'm goin' to take him upstairs while I find my 'ead."

The boy stood between the two men, watching their faces narrowly. He had been startled by the alteration in Fix; but the change in his father dazed him with wonderment and alarm.

Three weeks had passed since the night of the murder. By the aid of Fix's tortuous machinations, Marketer had had his broken arm set by a derelict surgeon whom the authorities hungered to lay by the heels on several very ugly counts. He wore the injured limb in a big sling contrived

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from an old shawl of Judith's. He was haggard and wasted by pain and fever. A week's growth of hair encumbered his chin. Overmuch indulgence in the nepenthe of the brandy bottle had bleared his eyes and cracked his lips. But that was not the worst of him. There was an indescribable horror and anguish expressed on his countenance, as if some evil spirit lurked within him, preying on his vitals.

"Come in," he said, gritting his teeth, as he haled Deuce by the collar toward the stairs. "We'll soon see . . ."

"Let him go, you fool!" Bill Fix rasped out. "What do you want with him 'ere?"

"By my cadaver! if you talk to me like that agin, Bill," said Marketer with calculated deliberation, "I'll serve you same's . . ."

But here Deuce began to struggle and raise a piercing outcry. His old fear of his father was so heightened by the gruesome change in his appearance, and he had such a paralysing sense of something unspeakably secret and unhallowed overshadowing the whole place, that he was half crazed with horror. So he continued to rock the walls with his screams until Marketer suddenly struck him senseless by bringing down his ponderous fist with all his force on the crown of his head.

"God! You've killed him, too—your own child!" shrieked Fix. "I'll not stand by——"

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"Get up," cried Marketer, for the old receiver's legs had failed him, and he had fallen on his knees. "Gimme a 'and with him, can't you, 'stead o' bleatin' there, you mummy! Spit o' my 'and! I wish Judy was 'ere. She's ten times the man you are. . . ."

Between them they carried Deuce upstairs and laid him on the bed. He was already recovering his faculties. He opened his eyes and whimpered.

Marketer wiped the moisture from his face.

"Fine thing you done now, I don't think," said Fix, showing his snagged teeth in a wolf-like grin of rage. "Why couldn't you let him go at first?"

Marketer reeled to the cupboard, seized a bottle and drank from the neck.

"My friend," he said, thickly, "I'll trouble you to buy a muzzle. I know what I'm a-doin' of, an' I don't take any orders from you. Not at present I don't. Think you got me by the tripes since—the accident. But you ain't. I'm your master any day, an' if you don't quite see it yet I'll 'ave to bore a 'ole in your 'ead an' let some light through."

"You threaten me?"

"Well, don't you come it either, you miserable ole shyster! It was 'Chick! Chick! Chick!' all the time, before. Now there's words flyin'

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about I never knew you'd ever learnt. An it won't do, my noble chal. Not by the breadth of a rope it won't do."

And herein Marketer spoke his bitter mind. He was not of the breed that truckles. For his very life's sake he would not give up one iota of that lip service which he was wont to exact from all with whom he associated, which was so dear to his uncouth sense of personal dignity. Rather would he goad a man who had some fancied hold over him into yielding up his power by forcing him to exercise it. His present attitude toward Fix stood his warranty for that. There must have been, then, some admirable quality gone astray here, some hint of worthy pride grown crooked.

Whilst Deuce still lay rallying slowly from the effects of the blow he had received, Judith returned with a laden basket. The boy exclaimed delightedly at sight of her, for she had always been kind to him. Fix told her all there was to tell of how he came to be there. She gave Marketer an inquiring glance that spoke to him so plainly he was visibly abashed. But she said nothing aloud. She went and sat beside Deuce and talked to him cheerily.

Big Ben, in the distance, boomed out the hour of six.

Deuce sat up. "I must go," he cried, excitedly. "Miss Ivy will be wonderin' about me."

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He scrambled down from the bed. "She'll be simply wild about me."

"You stay where you are," said Marketer.

"But why, Chick, why?" demanded Fix, peevishly. "What's the good of him to you?"

For a moment Marketer wavered. He would honestly have been glad to let the boy go. His presence there would be at once an incubus and a reproach. And he disliked Deuce intensely, had a rancorous feeling of resentment against him. It might be thought that the sight of his child, stricken and afraid, the victim of his own unbridled violence, would have kindled in the father some divine spark of compassion, some ruthless impulse. But it is the hard fact that man is as often as not moved only to increased bitterness and spite by the contemplation of the results of his own unkindness. To justify evil conduct, one must persist in it, or proclaim oneself a wanton weakling. To offer redress is tacitly to admit an offence. And it was not Marketer's way to eat such humble-pie as that. Then, if he yielded to his desire to be quit of Deuce he would seem to fall in line with Fix's views; which was a grievous thing indeed, and one not to be tolerated. So, perversely, unhappily, like Pharoah of old, he hardened his heart, and swore that the boy should stay where he was. The boy was his own son. His proper place was in his father's house. Did

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they think that he, Marketer, was lost to all decent feeling ?

“ Where you bin, Deuce, all this time ? ” asked Judith.

Ah, where ? Both Fix and Marketer were all agog to know.

“ Please don’t ask me, Judy,” he implored her.

“ You got to tell us at once,” said his father.

Deuce, who leaned shivering against the bed-side, cocked his chin defiantly and answered not. No, he would not tell them, he declared.

Perhaps the boy’s display of spirit secretly gratified Marketer. It was the shrinking, trembling, whimpering Deuce he detested so much. It remains that he turned away with a guttural laugh, saying :

“ All right, pig’s head. Nobody wants to know. If they did want to know you’d ’ave to give tongue lively. So I tell you ! . . . Take him away, Judy. Put him to bed somewhere for the life o’ my mind. Sick o’ the very sight of him, I am ! ”

CHAPTER XX

CONSISTING OF YET MORE EXTRACTS FROM
THE RESPECTIVE DIARIES OF MISS IVY
PORCH AND MR. SIDNEY GANDY

Dec. 21. 7 P.M. Mr. Gandy's Diary. The boy is a boy after all, and I have done him a grave injustice.

I have not been home an hour, and have just dressed for dinner, as Simson is giving a little farewell supper at the Club to-night. I only hope that boy will turn up before I want to start. If he doesn't she will be sure to want to impound my services, and I simply never can resist her. But he is sure to turn up like the king when you're not sure whether the ace has been played or not.

I have just ten minutes—no, five—to be late in. Always be a little late, if possible, where a woman's punctuality is involved. It saves her from self-reproach, and flatters her by giving her a fancied superiority over you. Women don't like men of their word, though they often marry them. That is why I'm a bachelor.

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But about the boy.

Positively he has not yet returned from his afternoon stroll. He was due back at half past five. By six o'clock, when I arrived, she was already in a parlous state. Now she is simply frantic, and I greatly fear the dinner may suffer. . . . Ten past seven. I go!

Dec. 22, 1 A.M. At a quarter past seven the Prairie Flower informed me, with careful conscientiousness, that Miss Porch said it was seven o'clock. The girl is a Jesuit. To adjust my tie and pass a brush over my hair was but the work of ten short minutes. Then I dashed downstairs.

There was no sign of the boy.

She ate nothing, though the cutlets were superb.

"I can't think," she remarked to me, "how you can go on eating mutton in that heartless way!"

"Dear me! and I thought it was lamb!" said I.

I thought that would be sure to fetch her, but it didn't.

"You care nothing about dear Walter," she said reproachfully.

"He is all right. Never fear," I said, though I confess I was beginning to feel rather uneasy about the brat myself. But the omelette I will write an article some day on *Man—Before*

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and After Dinner. No, I won't. That would be impossible. For the only state in which a man could do justice to such an article is the after-dinner state when, of course, mental exertion of any kind is repugnant to the last degree to any man—the obtrusion of thought a desecration of a heavenly content.

“Dear Mr. Gandy,” she said, during the coffee, “you are so kind . . .”

On hearing this I mentally cancelled my engagement with Simson at once. Alas! She wanted me—I expected it—to help her to search for the boy.

“There are,” said I, “some thirty thousand miles of streets in London, I believe——”

“But the police-stations.”

“Oh, don't take such a gloomy view of the matter as that,” I implored her. “Think of the correcting influences of this house—your own precepts and example. He——”

“Of course,” said she. “He has done nothing wrong.”

I reflected that the boy *was* a boy; but I said nothing.

“He may have got lost.”

“My dear Miss Porch,” said I, “he is hardly young enough for that. He is, I should say, as capable of looking after himself as—as you are.”

I am aware that that was not a hopeful view to take of the case; but I knew she would not understand me.

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"We will go," said she—and I groaned inwardly at hearing that first person plural—"we will go first to police-stations, then to the hospitals, then to the workhouse, and then——"

I really thought she was going to add "the mad-houses;" but she added nothing at all.

"You desire me to accompany you?"

"I thought you would be eager to do so."

"So I am," said I. (God forgive me.) "But I did not want to alarm you unduly by appearing anxious."

"Forgive me," she said. "I am not quite mistress of myself."

I sent the Prairie Flower for a cab, as it was a beast of a raw, foggy night, and put on my thickest overcoat and a couple of mufflers. Then we started.

The inspector was sympathetic, but intelligent.

"How old is the child?" he asked.

"Eleven."

"Ah," said he; "then the nurse is missing too."

"Eleven *years*," said I.

He looked puzzled. "I gathered . . . Boy or girl?"

"Boy," she replied; "but no girl could be more——"

"I know," said he. "Got a family of my own. All girls." He sucked his pencil. "Dark or fair?"

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"Dark," said I.

"Fair," said she.

The inspector did not seem to think it mattered.

"Does he know his name?" he inquired.

I think he was indulging in a morbid wit; but if so Miss Ivy's reply dished him. "I don't know," she said.

"Is he"—he tapped his forehead—"all there, madam?"

"He is perfectly right in that respect," said I. "But he is merely the adopted son of this lady, and so may give his name either as Walter Porch or Deuce Marketer."

"Marketer, eh?" said the inspector sharply. "Uncommon name that. Who and what was his father?"

"We know nothing of his father," said I.

"We know nothing of the man who calls himself his father," said Miss Ivy.

"Marketer," murmured the inspector. "I'll make a note of that."

He asked other questions which we answered as well as we could, then closed his book with a slam that nearly caused me to swallow that loose tooth, and told me he would let me know if any information came to hand.

"And may I add, please," faltered Miss Ivy, "that I am prepared to pay a reward for his recovery. Say twenty-five pounds, rising to

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fifty or a hundred, if he is not found soon."

"Well, madam," said the inspector, "I shouldn't advise you to offer a reward just yet. It's apt to tempt people to do things. . . . You understand me?"

But his well-meant counsel found no favour with her.

We left him telephoning that a child-angel, accompanied by a nondescript dog, was lost on the earth, in or near London.

"I *shall* offer a reward," said she, as soon as we got into the street. "To-night, too."

"How can you do that?" I asked.

"I shall go to some of the newspaper offices and insert an advertisement," said she.

"But they won't insert them to-night," I explained to her.

"They will in to-morrow morning's issue."

"No, nor then, either," said I.

But she would not take my word for it.

So we spent two happy hours in the Strand and Fleet Street and Printing House Square. . . .

Here the entry breaks off abruptly. A reference to Miss Porch's diary reveals a dreadful maze of hieroglyphics in which only one sentence is legible and that is more dark with mystery than the unreadable portions. Says the lady, "Mr. Gandy would have it that

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dear Walter is fair." This is a bewildering discrepancy.

But let us examine the records for the next four days, for the most part meagre enough.

Dec. 22. Miss Porch's Diary. None of the advertisements have appeared. It is so odious of Mr. Gandy to be always right.

Same date. Mr. Gandy's Diary. I think I was very dignified, considering.

Dec. 23. Miss Porch's Diary. Every one of the advertisements is in to-day, so Mr. Gandy was not so very right, after all. But, alas! no one has called about Walter. And there is no news from any of the police-stations. I have written to all the papers increasing the reward.

Dec. 24. Mr. Gandy's Diary. Christmas Eve, and the boy still seems to be, to all appearances, hopelessly lost. I can only conclude that he has been fatally attracted back to the old life. But to-morrow won't be at all the sort of day I have been looking forward to.

She, I think, does a lot of crying in her spare time.

I went down about eight o'clock in the evening to cheer her up a bit. I hadn't the pluck to go down before.

I found her sitting in the parlour. The table was littered with a multitude of small articles that she had bought as Christmas presents for

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the boy. There were, besides, heaps of stockings, scarves, ties, and so on, which she had made herself.

I don't know, but it seemed . . .

Here again the entry ends abruptly.

Same date. Miss Porch's Diary. Dear Mr. Gandy! Dear, dear Mr. Gandy! There! Even in the midst of my great trouble I cannot but be sensible of his beautiful, his wonderful goodness and kindness.

I was enjoying myself in a melancholy way by holding a sort of sad review of the little presents I had intended for my darling boy when he came into the room.

I looked up at him and . . . It sounds almost sacrilege to say so; but still I cannot believe that it was merely due to a cold in the head.

"I suppose you would call this mawkish sentimentality?" I said to him, pointing to the table. I did not say it bitterly, but with a sort of dreadful playfulness.

He answered me in a strange way by inviting me up to his room. He opened the mysterious little drawer in his desk that has so often puzzled me, and drew out a fine gold watch. He opened the case and asked me to read the inscription. I did so, and now copy it out, exactly. It said:

"To Walter Porch from Sidney Gandy. A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. . . ."

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I am so glad I did not kiss him. I had clutched the lapels of his coat.

But here there is another vexatious hiatus. The next entry, however, is full and ample.

Dec. 25. Miss Porch's Diary. I rose long before daylight, as I could not sleep, and went downstairs. It was very cold and dark and quiet. I felt woefully depressed. To cheer myself up I went into the cellar and got the evergreens I bought yesterday for decorations. I thought that at any rate I would deck the rooms with holly, and so on, even if ours was to be a melancholy Christmas, in case dear Walter should by any chance return and bring a happy ending to the day. For the same reason I decided that the turkey should be cooked and one of the puddings made hot and smoking.

Rosalie helped me a little, and by breakfast time the house looked gay—forlornly gay, I thought.

I am writing this at 3 P.M. As yet nothing has happened. Mr. Gandy has not yet put in an appearance. But I have sent Rosalie up to his room, and he promised to come down to tea.

Later. The dreadful man has come and gone. I will not believe . . . But let me be coherent.

It was just after tea had been cleared away and Mr. Gandy and I were sitting over the fire, when a knock came at the front door. Rosalie, looking

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very mysterious, entered the room. Imagine, if you can, my state of mind. My heart was beating so that I felt almost choked, for I had divined instinctively that our unknown visitor came about dear Walter.

"A gentleman would like to see you, 'm," said Rosalie.

"What name did he give?" I asked.

"He wouldn't give no name, 'm."

"Did he state his business?"

"Yes, 'm. 'Tell the lady,' he said, 'that I come about the boy that's lost.'"

"Show him in at once," I cried.

"Calm yourself, my dear Miss Porch," said Mr. Gandy, quite as agitated, really, as I was myself. And he laid his hand, unwittingly, on mine.

Our visitor entered. He was a big, tall man of a bold bearing that yet had something furtive in it. He looked, somehow, as if he ought to have been a florid-faced person; but, as a matter of fact, he was very pale and haggard. I did not like his appearance or manner, though he was respectably dressed, and civil enough, at first. He walked into the room, and said "Good morning, ma'am. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you." I thought he seemed painfully shy and nervous, in spite of a certain swagger that he affected.

"Pray sit down," I said. "You come about my dear boy?"

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"Yes, 'm," he replied.

"D'you know where he is?" asked Mr. Gandy.

"Well, sir, I do an' I don't," was his odd rejoinder.

"Might I inquire your name?" Mr. Gandy proceeded.

"My name's Jones," he said, readily enough. But I did not believe him.

I burst out, "Is he safe, sir?"

"The boy? Safe enough, at present," said Mr. Jones.

"Where is he?"

"That's tellin's," he said, with a sort of laugh.

"Do you know where he is?" Mr. Gandy insisted.

"Yes," said he.

"Why have you not brought him with you?"

"'Tain't my likes," said the man. "An', besides, where'd I be, s'posin' you was to stick to him an' not pay me nothing."

"We should certainly not think of paying you a farthing until you produced him," said Mr. Gandy. "Bring him here and the money is yours."

"No," said he doggedly. "I must 'ave the money fust. If you don't like to trust me——" He made a motion of the hands.

"Dear Mr. Gandy," I whispered. "I dare not risk imperilling dear Walter's safety for one moment. I do not trust this man any more than

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you do, but I would rather forfeit all I have in the world than let a chance escape of recovering our dear boy."

"If you will leave it to me," said Mr. Gandy, "I think I can manage this affair for you better than you could yourself." I had never known him to be so peremptory. Altogether, I confess I was surprised by the firmness and decision of his manner and the authoritative tone in which he spoke. He turned to Mr. Jones. "Have a glass of wine?" said he.

"Thank you, sir," said the man.

"Ah! Perhaps you would prefer something stronger?"

"If you had got sech a thing as a drop o' brandy——"

Mr. Gandy poured him out a glassful of the spirit, which he drained at a gulp, dreadfully.

"Now," said Mr. Gandy, "I take it you are a man of the world?"

"I'm a man o' the world, the flesh, an' the devil," said Mr. Jones.

"You don't mind if I speak plainly?"

"Plainer the better."

"Very well. How did you come to know of this lady's loss?"

"Read it in the paper."

"I see. You noticed, no doubt, that a reward was offered?"

"Well, sir, I'm a pore man——"

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"It was a pretty considerable reward, eh?"

"'Andsome, I call it."

"Very handsome, indeed. Now, does it not occur to you, Mr. Jones, that other men may also have read that advertisement?"

"'Course."

I thought he looked a trifle uneasy.

"Now I understand," said Mr. Gandy, "that you want Miss Porch (this lady) to pay you the whole or a part of the reward in advance? To trust to your honour, in short, to produce the boy later on? You have given us a name—I don't say it is a false one; it might be, that's all—but you have not given us your address, or the address at which the boy is staying. Are you prepared to give us these two addresses? Or, it may be, one address?"

The man deliberated. "No, I ain't," he said, at last. "I'm an honest man an' I'll do what I promise. But I won't give you the address."

Mr. Gandy regarded him keenly. "I see," said he. "And from your words I deduce that the boy is actually in your own custody, or at least, that you live in the house where he is confined."

"I never said so," answered the man.

Mr. Gandy smiled. "You state further," he went on, "that the boy is all right. In that case he is being detained by force."

The man seemed greatly taken aback. "'Ow d'you make that out?" he said.

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“It is obvious. He is not a baby. If he were free to come and go—not being hampered by any injury or sickness—I am convinced he would return here, or, at any rate, communicate with us in some way.”

Mr. Gandy stole a triumphant glance at me. I was truly amazed at his shrewdness ; but I was sore afraid that it was leading us further and further away from the possibility of my regaining Walter.

“Now,” said Mr. Gundy, “does it not occur to you that any man, having read that advertisement, might come to us, as you have done, professing to know where the boy is and claiming the reward in advance, who was really in utter ignorance as to the boy’s place of concealment ? One moment, please. We are speaking as one man of the world to another. I say that this is possible in a world of rogues ; and such a man as I describe would naturally object to giving his proper name and address—as you do. You see my point ? ”

“I see one thing,” said the man. “You think I’m a liar. You think I can’t produce the boy. But, by God ! I can.”

I began to feel terribly frightened, for our visitor was getting exceedingly angry and fierce, and I feared he might assault Mr. Gandy. Mr. Gandy, however, kept quite calm.

“I think,” said he, “that Miss Porch would be

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doing an ill-advised thing if she paid you the reward, or any part of it, without knowing who you are, where you live, or how you came to know of the boy's whereabouts. To ask us to trust you blindly while you will not trust us even with these formal particulars is to ask too much. I am a business man. I have been a business man all my life, and a fairly successful one. But I have not made my way by placing such a strain on any man's credulity as you want to place on mine—and this lady's here. Really, my good fellow, it won't do. Give us some sort of information and then I will talk to you."

"But Mr. Gandy——" I interposed.

The man then addressed me. "Madam," he said, "p'r'aps you ain't so suspicious as this gentleman 'ere. Or p'r'aps you're more fond o' the boy'n what he is. I tell you, madam, straight and true, that if you don't trust me out an' out, 'arm'll come to that there blessed child. You'll never see him agin. I *do* know where 'e is. I can 'elp him to escape an' send him 'ome 'ere. But there's reasons . . ."

"Wait a moment," I interrupted. I turned to Mr. Gandy. "Don't you think——?" I was beginning (for to miss the least chance of finding some trace of my dear boy seemed positively heartless) "don't you think we might——?"

"I will tell you what you can do," said Mr. Gandy. "It will be a perfectly fair arrangement

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for all parties. And if our friend here is speaking the truth—as I have no doubt he is—when he says that he knows where Walter is, he can have no possible objection to my proposal.”

“But——” I protested.

“Miss Porch,” said Mr. Gandy, and I never knew him to speak so coldly and cruelly before, “do you leave this matter in my hands or am I to be openly discredited before this gentleman? You must decide one way or the other.”

Of course I could only say that I left it to him; but my heart was sick with misgiving.

“In that case,” said Mr. Gandy, “I will state my proposal. It is a very simple one and may be explained in a very few words. It is this, then: That you give Mr. Jones a cheque, post-dated January 1. How does that suit you, Mr. Jones?”

I did not quite follow this; but the man did, obviously. That the idea was repugnant to him I could tell from the scowl that darkened his face. I thought he was on the verge of a violent outbreak; but when he spoke it was quite quietly.

“An’ what’d be the use of a cheque to me?” he asked. “I ain’t got no bankin’ account.”

“The cheque would be made payable to bearer. You would merely have to present it to the cashier over the counter and it would at once be honoured.” Mr. Gandy paused impressively.

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“Providing,” he went on, “the boy was restored to us in the meantime.”

“Couldn’t you,” asked the man, speaking in an altered voice, “couldn’t you pay me some’ing down in cash now, an’ gimme a cheque for the balance, as you say?”

“Why should Miss Porch do that?” asked Mr. Gandy. “It would not be fair to her. You might stick to the money and do nothing. But if you are given a cheque for the full amount that would ensure your bringing the boy back here, or, any way, setting him at liberty.”

For a moment the man was silent; then he began to utter language most foul and disgusting.

“You are precious anxious to know who I am,” he shouted. “Well, I’ll tell you. I’m the boy’s father. An’ my name is Marketer. An’ you can take it out o’ that . . .”

It would be impossible for me to describe my state of mind.

“I guessed as much,” said Mr. Gandy. “This lady has confided——”

“Yes, an’ another thing,” stormed the man, “I’m the only person that’s got a legal right to him. An’, by God! I’ll use that right. You shan’t never see him agin. I’ll keep him under lock an’ key. . . . An’ if you do get ’old of him I’ll ’ave you prosecuted for kidnappin’——”

“I should not talk of prosecutions if I were you,” said Mr. Gandy. “By coming here and

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trying to swindle this lady out of fifty pounds you have rendered yourself liable to be indicted for conspiracy to defraud, my friend."

The man snarled like a savage wild beast, and then began again to use such odious language I had to put my hands over my ears.

Mr. Gandy rose with dauntless mien and said that if Mr. Marketer did not quit the house he would send for the police.

"I've 'urt my arm, lucky for you," said Mr. Marketer, "or I'd put such a poultice on you, you'd think it was your birthday." (I remember distinctly the oddness of the expression.)

At last he left the house, and then I gave way. It seems to me that we have lost poor Walter altogether. Mr. Gandy tried to assure me that our boy would yet be restored to us; but I am beyond the consolations of sophistry.

My heart is broken.

Same date. Midnight. Mr. Gandy's Diary. I'm afraid it is all up. I try not to think so; but it is no use. We cannot take the boy from his own father, even if we do contrive to find out where he is. And there can be no doubt as to the relationship—the likeness alone is sufficient. *She*—poor thing!—maintains, in a strange way, that she knows who is Walter's true father; that this man is an impostor. . . . Hysteria, of course.

TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER

THE RESTORATION

BAFFLED and raging, Marketer returned to Slant Street, occupying himself on the way by chewing the bitter cud of his defeat. To his impetuous mind, his scheme had seemed so promising; and there is little doubt it would have been successful but for the wise and timely offices of the intrepid Mr. Gandy.

‡ The idea had come to Marketer on reading Miss Porch's advertisement as an inspired solution of his difficulties, one which would at once set him free from the irksome presence of Deuce, and, at the same time, put money in his pocket. He had confided it to no one, hoping to steal a march on Fix, whom he suspected of harbouring a similar idea. . . . And his pains had gone all for naught. Here he was left with the boy still upon his hands, and, moreover, wholly dependent on the old receiver even for the wherewithal to live. So sanguine of success had he been that morning, that when Fix showed some disinclination to supply him with further funds he had



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contemptuously told him to keep his money to himself. As a result of this indiscretion he was now reduced to a few shillings and with an un-savoury banquet of humble pie before him to be eaten if he would redeem his plight.

Deuce, hardly recovered from the effects of his late illness, was, between grief and fear, in a state bordering on utter prostration. Marketer had locked him up in the garret to prevent him from escaping, and there he lay, too soul-sick to care for anything, when his father burst in upon him.

It was dark in the room. On striking a match, Marketer discovered the boy asleep, lying on the floor. He jerked him roughly to his feet and poured out the lees of his anger upon him. He told him where he had been and what he had not accomplished. Deuce listened dully, too well used by now to such outbreaks to heed the matter of his father's words, only praying to be spared his violence. But Marketer said a thing at last that arrested his sluggish attention instantly.

"But there's more ways o' gettin' money out o' them than one," said Marketer. "I ain't bin in that 'ouse for nothing. Trust your humble to keep his eyes peeled. . . . There's the bathroom door. . . . Bill Fix isn't the world. I can do a job on my own as . . ."

He checked himself abruptly, for there was that in the boy's eyes which told him that he had

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added yet one more imprudence of speech to the long tally standing already to his discredit.

“ Was they kind to you ? ” he asked, trying to retrieve his error of judgment. “ If they was kind to you . . . ” for Deuce uttered no word. “ Why worry ? ” thought Marketer. “ The boy is all abroad.”

He left the room, carefully locking the door, and went downstairs. As he passed the first-floor landing Judith emerged from the front room.

“ I bin keepin’ your dinner . . . ”

He consigned the dinner to the pit. “ Where’s Fix ? ”

“ But, Chick . . . ”

He brushed her aside. He found Fix dozing in the parlour behind the shop, heavy with food. He demanded a sovereign.

“ Ain’t got it,” said Fix, concisely.

“ What d’you mean ? ”

“ What I say.”

“ If you don’t parker——”

“ Well, what’ll you do ? ”

Marketer abated something of his truculent demeanour. “ Come on,” he said. “ Bung it.”

“ Think I’m made o’ money ? ” asked Fix.

Then Marketer tried cajolery, but Fix was not to be won over.

“ Do some work an’ I’ll talk to you,” said he.

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"Bungled the last job. An' nothin' since but booze an' bounce. I ain't goin' to stand it."

"Why don't you peach?"

Fix made no reply.

"I'll tell you why," said Marketer, "'cos you damn well know if you did I'd serve you the same as I served that other, if I had to climb out o' the dock to get at you."

Nevertheless, he shuddered slightly, and his voice fell to a husky whisper.

"I'll play the game straight enough," said Fix. "But I ain't goin' to 'ave me life made a misery, an' be drunk out o' 'ouse an' 'ome by any one, so I tell you."

Marketer cursed him by all his impossible gods and went upstairs again. He found Judith, with red eyes, drooping over the fire.

"Lumme!" he remarked. "This is a hearty sort o' Christmas. Gimme some'ing to drink."

"I wish you wouldn't," she pleaded.

"You're just as bad as the rest," he said. "I'm sick o' the 'ole boilin'."

"No, Chick, no," she cried. "Not sick o' me. Think how I nursed you an' looked after you all the time you was ill."

"Sheckles!" said he. "I *am* sick o' you. An' I'm goin' to cut it."

"You wouldn't leave me, Chick, after . . ."

"Wait till I get the chance an' see. . . . Why,

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you used to be as gay as Bank 'Oliday. No end o' good company you was. An' now . . .”

“I could be again, Chick. It's only you're so rough on me. An' I don't know what I've done. I've tried. It's the way, though. Men can do as they like an' not care, but when a woman follers her own 'eart she's playin' pitch an' toss wi' death. If you'd married me . . .”

“Don't you come that.”

“I should not care if you were kind,” she sobbed. “But you despise me now. You think I'm light !”

“Oh, let us be joyful !” cried Marketer, as she hid her face in her hands and wept.

But they patched up an indifferent peace before nightfall, the chief factor in which was Judith's timely display of a small hoard of money which she had contrived, in the miraculous way of women, to save out of her past earnings.

On the morrow they went out together to spend the day by spending the money. Bill Fix, left alone with Deuce, ran upstairs, and was about to tap at the garret door when he heard a sound proceeding from within that puzzled him and kindled his curiosity so that he did not knock, after all. It was a harsh, tearing sound that grated on the nerves. Again and again it was repeated. Fix rattled the handle and called out, “You there, Deuce ?”

The sound ceased instantly.

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"You there, Deuce?"

"Yes," came the reply.

"What you doin'?"

"Nothing."

"What's that noise?"

"What noise?"

"That tearin' noise."

But Deuce was silent.

Marketer had locked the door and taken away the key in his pocket, so that Fix could not satisfy his rabid curiosity.

"You're up to something, Deuce. What is it? Come, tell us," he pleaded. "I've always bin your pal."

"I'd tell you," said Deuce, melted at once by this appeal, "but it might get you into trouble—with him."

"Your father?"

"Yes."

"Don't do nothing to upset him again, Deuce."

"That's all right," said the boy unsatisfactorily.

At that moment there came a loud rat-tat at the street door. Fix, vaguely alarmed, as he always was by the unexpected, ran downstairs. He opened the door and found a stranger on the step, a man of middle height, hawk-eyed, with sharp, peaked features.

Fix's marrow hardened as he confronted him, for he recognised, with the acuteness born of habitual apprehension, a detective.

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"All right," said the man. "Haven't come for you yet, Mr. Fix. Alone?"

Fix nodded. He concluded naturally that the detective came to arrest Marketer, and could think of no one but him.

"I know your lodger—no names—and the girl are out," said the officer unexpectedly. "I watched them leave the house. But"—he tapped Fix on the breastbone with his forefinger—"isn't there a boy here?"

Fix was greatly taken aback.

"'Ow did you know?" he stammered.

"Never you mind," said the other. "Bring him down."

"I can't."

"No 'can't' about it. You must."

"But he's locked in."

"Is he though?" The man looked suspicious. "Where?"

"In the garret."

"And you don't possess a key? Come, come, Mr. Fix, this isn't quite up to your reputation."

"It's a fact I'm tellin' you."

"I think," was the slow rejoinder, "I must see for myself."

"Pleasure," replied Fix.

They went upstairs. The detective shook the handle, then applied his eye to the keyhole.

"Are you there, young 'un?"

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But there was no sound. He turned to Fix. "If you've been telling me any lies——"

"He was there a minute or two ago, I swear. I spoke to him."

But the detective, shouldering the old man roughly aside, hurled himself against the door and burst it open.

Fix, following him into the room, saw a strange thing.

Deuce sat in the middle of the floor, surrounded by a chaotic litter of strips of linen and blanket, some of which he had already knotted together, whilst others lay in rows to his hand. The mystery of the harsh noises that Fix had lately heard was now explained. The boy had been tearing up the bedclothes to make a rope by which to escape from the window.

"Hullo!" said the detective. "What does this mean, young 'un?"

Deuce, who recognised the nature of the man's calling not less readily than Fix had done, rose from amid the litter, and approached him with the diffident eagerness of new hope.

"You're a p'liceman, sir, ain't you?" he exclaimed. "Take me away, sir. Do take me away." He clung to the man's hand.

"That's what I have come for," the detective answered him. He turned to Fix. "And look here, you," he went on. "I shall have to call

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you over the coals for your share in this little business. What d'you mean . . . ?”

“No, no,” interposed Deuce. “It ain’t Bill’s fault at all. Mr. Fix, I mean. He’s always been all right to me.”

“Who was it brought you here, then ?”

“No one. I came o’ my own accord, wuss luck! An’ then *he* nabbed me an’ wouldn’t let me go.”

“You mean Marketer.”

“Yes, my father.”

“Is he really the father ?” the detective asked Fix.

“No doubt o’ that,” was the reply. “I was in the ’ouse time the kid was born.”

The detective looked somewhat dubious. Much of his jauntiness departed out of him. He reflected awhile.

“I’ll risk it anyway,” he said at last. “Now, my young gallows, skip about and get your toggery.”

Deuce, staying not on the order of his going, so eager was he to escape from the terror of that house, was ready almost before the detective had done speaking.

Fix followed them downstairs slowly. As the boy, running ahead, opened the street door, the old receiver called out : “Ain’t you goin’ to say good-bye to me, Deuce ?”

Deuce, turning, showed a face of real regret.

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"I'm sorry. . . . I forgot," he said.

Fix stooped, almost shyly, and kissed him on the forehead. When the door had shut he returned to the room behind the shop, muttering to himself, mournfully, that he was an old man now. . . .

An hour later Deuce stood once more in the old maid's parlour.

"But how did you come to find him?" asked Miss Ivy tremulously, when the first emotional greetings were done, and the time had come for wine and biscuits for the detective's regalement. Mr. Gandy sat importantly in the arm-chair with a beaming countenance. He had had rather a trying day with his gentle landlady, who plainly thought him a monster for that he had saved her from wasting fifty pounds. There was only one fly's eye in the ointment, the sad absence of Snuff. Deuce had comforted himself for the loss of his pet by telling himself that he would be bound to find his way home, whilst Miss Ivy had supposed that he must be with the boy in his captivity.

"Your mentioning the name of Marketer, the night when you called at our office, set me off on the trail," said the detective in answer to the old maid's question. "He'd reported on his ticket only a few days before, so I knew where he was staying, and I went down to Slant Street just to look him up. I couldn't spare much

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time, but I used it the best I could, which didn't amount to much. There wasn't a trace to be had o' the boy, though I kept on sending youngsters into the shop for ha'p'orths o' sweets. Still I didn't give up. And, yesterday, me being free, I thought I couldn't do worse than put in a regular field day."

He went on to tell how about noon he had seen Marketer set out on his errand to Miss Porch's house. He had followed him, and waited outside during the interview until Marketer came out. "Waiting in the cold makes you thoughtful," said the detective, "and it come upon me all of a heap what my man's little game was. From the look of his face when he come out I guessed that he hadn't brought it off. The rest, of course, was easy.

"I'm not sure, though," he concluded thoughtfully, "that I've done quite right, after all. You see, after all this Marketer is the boy's father. No doubt about that."

"He is *not* his father," said Miss Porch sharply. "I know he is not."

"How do you know, Madam?"

"I am sure he is not."

"That mightn't be sufficient. But, anyhow, I don't think Marketer would care to fight it in the Courts. I think, as a matter of fact, he'll keep dark altogether now he knows that us Yard fellows have got the case in hand. But anyhow.

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Madam, if anything should happen, you let me know. Don't you give him up——”

“As if I should!” cried Miss Ivy.

“Quite correct. And now,” said the detective, rising and looking into his hat. “I must be off.”

“Please wait a moment, won't you?” said Miss Ivy sweetly. “I want to—to write a letter I would like you to post. What is your name, may I ask?”

“Turnbull, Madam.”

Miss Ivy fluttered away, and Mr. Gandy and Mr. Turnbull discussed the wonderful weather. Presently she returned and handed the detective a small packet. He looked at it.

“But, Madam,” he faltered, “I'm not officially allowed . . .”

“Not on an official holiday?” asked Miss Ivy.

It was drawing on toward midnight, and Miss Ivy had gone personally to ascertain for herself that Deuce's bedroom had been made meet and fitting for his august reception, when the boy asked Mr. Gandy :

“Are you afraid o' burglars, sir?”

The old bachelor stared and started. “Why, what do you mean?” he cried.

“I mean,” answered Deuce gravely, “that I rather expect one to call here some night, soon. I'm almost sure he will.”

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“ My dear Walter ! ”

“ An’ I s’pose,” said Deuce, looking puzzled, “ that it wouldn’t be quite the thing, would it, to put a tiggie on his ear ? ”

“ On his ear ? Whose ear ? ”

“ Father’s.”

“ You think your father . . . ’

“ I do so. He said . . . But don’t you fret. I know a way to baulk him. Learnt it by listening, like you learn a lot o’ things. . . . You see,” he went on, “ I shouldn’t like to frighten Aunt Ivy——”

“ On no account ! ”

“ An’ that’s why I tell you. . . .The way is . . . ”

He was still whispering excitedly to Mr. Gandy when Miss Ivy returned to announce that every thing was as clean as a new pin and sweet as fresh-mown hay.

TWENTY-SECOND CHAPTER

OSSA ON PELION

MARKETER, on learning what had happened, was secretly relieved. He felt that a difficulty had been providentially solved for him, and that, too, in a way which involved no loss to his dignity. Nevertheless, he blustered and stormed considerably, roundly accusing Fix of having set the boy free. Fix had expected this accusation and disregarded it.

The next two days Marketer spent abroad for the most part in company with Judith, who seemed suddenly to have recovered her youth at that period ; but when there was little or no money left, her happy time came to an abrupt termination.

Marketer, as the result of his excesses, was unwell on the third day. He lay in bed, brooding darkly, until the afternoon. Judith sat alone in the shop, for Fix had gone on some trivial errand. The housebreaker, ascertaining this, proceeded to ransack the house on what was obviously a systematised plan. He found what

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he sought, a set of burglar's tools behind a loose piece of wainscoting. Carefully concealing the implements about his person, he slipped out into the street by the side door. He heard Judith calling out, asking him where he was going, as he made his stealthy departure: but he gave her no answer, and before she could intercept him he was in the street.

He spent the long hours before midnight in desultory wanderings over London that gradually drew him nearer and nearer to the prosperous north-western suburb in which Miss Porch resided. His intentions will thus be made plain, then. He had shaken off the thrall of Fix and was about to embark in business on his own account. He felt undeniably nervous about it. He had little of that power of initiative and organisation for which the old receiver was truly remarkable. He had never before planned such an enterprise, unaided. Further, the memory of his last fatal fiasco would not suffer itself to be dismissed from his mind. He seemed to walk in company with the pale shadow of his victim. The first aftermath of horror that he had reaped whilst the blood of his crime still stank in his nostrils returned to him now. He trembled and started at shadows, had a strange reluctance to turn corners, lest he should come face to face with . . . Something indefinably awful. For this reason he kept to the busier streets. He was not

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afraid of his fellow-creatures in mass, it was the lonely figure afar off, solitary, baffling identification, that daunted him.

By and by, as the night drew on, he began to have an uneasy feeling that some one was following him. Now every man has his one particular bogey of fear. Marketer's was a dread of being stalked. He was by no means lacking in physical courage and hardihood ; but the thought that some unknown enemy was dogging him seemed to melt his backbone.

Time and again he looked back suddenly, but the press of people was always too great for him to distinguish one man out of the shifting multitudes that crowded for ever on his heels. At last, so intense became his fear, he turned into a dark side street and walked slowly along until he passed a lamp-post and reached the gloom beyond. He stood there, in a patch of wavering shadows, watching the segment of brilliantly-lighted pavement at the corner. There was no one else in that secluded by-way either to the right or to the left of him ; but, as he gazed, he saw one unit in the throng that passed and re-passed like a galanty show in the flare of electric light in the main thoroughfare, detach itself and come after him.

He slipped into a front garden and waited. The footsteps came on steadily, increasing rapidly in pace, until they came so near that he could

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hear the quick breathing of his pursuer. He crouched down, peering through some myrtle-bushes. The on-comer was evidently at fault, for he paused irresolutely within a yard or two of Marketer's place of concealment. The house-breaker could not see his face : but the pose and form were unmistakeable : it was Cowcross. When he had passed on, and the slither of his shuffling progress was no longer audible, Marketer left his shelter and hurried back to the high road again. He got upon a tram-car and rode for a mile or two.

By this time it was drawing on toward twelve o'clock. He was still a good distance away from his destination. The neighbourhood was lonely and quiet. He strode briskly up a steep hill, glancing over his shoulder apprehensively as he went, until he came to the house of the old maid,

It presented a black face to him over the neat, clipped hedge of the garden. He found himself shivering, yet damp and hot beneath his clothes, as he hesitated there on the gravelled side-walk. A dog came up and nosed at his knees. He drove it away. But it retreated only a few yards and then stood barking at him. He stooped, picked up a stone, and flung it at the dog. The result was that the animal only increased its clamour.

He heard an upper window open, and saw a

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small white figure outlined against the blackness of the room beyond. A voice called out—he recognised it as the voice of Deuce—"Snuff! Snuff!"

The dog capered delightedly in the open roadway, expressing its joy in a series of short, sharp yelps and affectionate whinings. Marketer, foreseeing what was to come, fled hastily away and watched developments from a distance.

He saw the white figure, loosely cloaked in some dark over-garment, emerge from the door and come running down the path. He heard the harsh creak of the gate as it opened, and saw Deuce bending rapturously over his recovered pet. Then the boy and the dog withdrew together into the house again.

For a minute or two Marketer was disposed to postpone his attempt until a more propitious occasion. But the innate stubbornness of his nature overcame his misgivings. He resolved to go for a short walk and then return once more.

He approached the "chat" from the rearward this time. A wall divided the garden from a narrow footpath. Peering over this, he saw that a flight of wooden steps led up to the bath-room on the first floor, an easy way of ingress and egress contrived by Miss Ivy herself for use on warm summer days and nights when the garden was a desirable retreat.

He was soon at the foot of these steps, his pulses

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quicken now and his nerves strung taut. Excitement did not addle the brain of Marketer or send his wits straying. It braced and strengthened him. He was cool now and steady, quick and precise of movement. He mounted to the glass-panelled door, knelt there in the shadow of a mesh of creeper and tried the lock. It was fast, of course ; but he grinned contemptuously. He probed into the keyhole with a fine pair of pliers and found that the key still remained in it. Then he took from his pocket a small piece of stiff felt and thrust it under the door, nicely gauging the plumb line from the handle. As he thrust it under the door, he was aware of a small crackling noise as if the piece of felt had met some light obstacle. This rather worried him, but he proceeded with his work, swiftly, deftly. Once more he inserted the pliers in the keyhole, nipped the end of the key and turned it. Then he pushed it out and it fell noiselessly on the piece of felt. The catch flew back with a tiny click. A gentle shove informed him that there were two bolts. To draw them back—by means of an odd-looking implement somewhat resembling a pair of scissors, except that the blades were thin as a finely-tempered knife blade and had serrated edges, which he slipped between the jamb and the door itself—consumed a tedious amount of time ; for he could only shift the bolts about one-eighth of an inch at each bite. But he

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accomplished his purpose at last. He turned the handle and found that a chain still remained to be negotiated. He opened the door as far as it would go—about two inches—took another slightly larger pair of pliers, known technically as “spreaders,” and, fitting the nozzle into one of the links, forced it open until the adjoining link could be disengaged, when the two broken ends dropped apart and he was free to enter.

Exulting in his success, he pushed the door open confidently enough. It swung back about a foot. And then again broke out that curious crackling noise which had before worried him. To discover the mystery of this disconcerting sound, he opened the slide of his dark lantern, which he had previously lighted in readiness, held it out before him, and peered into the bathroom.

What he saw might have seemed inconsiderable to one less experienced than he. It was nothing more dreadful than many sheets of stiff newspaper spread in layers, two or three thick, over the concrete flooring. But the sight filled him with despair, utter and abject. He knew that he would never be able to pass over that innocent-looking obstacle. If he trod on the paper it would crackle and rustle alarmingly—how alarmingly none may realise who have not tried to walk on such a crisp carpet in a silent house. He could not pick up the sheets, either, without

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raising a very pandemonium of harsh, sibilant sounds. To stride across them was impossible : they were too many and extended too far. And even were it possible it would have been the act of a fool. You cannot take prodigious leaps without making a considerable noise and causing a shock to the very fabric of a house that will set every article of china or metal rattling and jingling in a way likely to rouse the most torpid of sleepers. And then there was the danger of the paper slipping away from under his heels and landing him plump on his back. The one device that the expert burglar fears, the one simple contrivance before which the most daring and cunning of them must sit down defeated, had been employed here. . . . Marketer, raging impotently at this complete frustration of his plans, guessed only too surely by whose inspiration.

“The boy !” he said within himself. “Done me again ! May . . . !”

His muttering ceased abruptly. A handle had rattled noisily on the floor above him. There came the fierce rush of a heavy body and a pattering of soft paws down the stairs. He withdrew his head, slammed the door of the bath-room, and sprang down the wooden steps into the garden below. Crouching low as he ran, he scuttled across the level turf of the lawn, vaulted the wall, and was back again in the narrow lane.

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Once he looked back. The house was lighted up. Moving gleams made plain the windows. He bent his head and sped onward until he had put a good furlong between himself and the scene of his ignoble failure. He came out in a deserted avenue where yellow gas-jets twinkled forlornly through the leafless branches of the saplings. As he paused for a moment to adjust his disordered attire and wipe his streaming forehead, a heavy black body projected itself upon him, as it were out of the earth. He was borne violently to the ground ; but succeeded in gripping his assailant's throat as he fell. They rolled over, Marketer uppermost.

" You ! . . . Cowcross ! " he grunted savagely, driving his fist into the stomach of the man who had seized upon him. He bestowed a second blow upon his antagonist that brought the blood welling up out of his white-lipped mouth.

Then he shook himself free, rose, and continued his headlong flight.

TWENTY-THIRD CHAPTER

THE FLIGHT OF MARKETER

LEG-WEARY and sore, stained and torn, with unkempt hair and bloodshot eyes, his face livid, his limbs nerveless, Marketer presented himself in Slant Street at noon on the following day.

He found Judith in the shop, wilted and worn with weeping. She rose with an ecstatic cry at sight of him.

“Chick!”

“Shut up!” he growled. “I oughtn’t to ha’ come back at all. Nobody bin for me, ’as there?”

“No one.”

“There will be,” he said. “It’s all up, Judy.”

She came closer to him, grasped his hand.

“What d’you mean?” she asked.

“Matters not,” said he. “I mean, it’s a red ’ot trail this time an’ I’m booked. Where’s Fix?”

“Gone out.”

“Where to?”

“Notting Dale. He had a telegram.”

“When was that?”

“’Arf hour ago or more.”

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"All right," said Marketer indifferently. "Now, listen to me. I'm off. I shall 'ave to keep myself close for a bit, you understand me. An' I want you to 'elp."

"You're not going to leave *me*, Chick."

"Course not. . . . But you must do as I say. First of all, go round to Ames' shop in the Cut an' get the boots I left there to be mended a week ago. They're paid for. Which is lucky, as it 'appens, as I ain't got the price of a shave on me. An' I must have 'em to go away with. Rokker?"

"Yes, Chick," she faltered. "You wouldn't deceive me, dear?"

"What d'you mean—deceive you?"

"You won't go till I come back?"

"Lumme!" he cried. "You're all suspicions, you are, like a beak. What should I do that for?"

"You couldn't . . . you couldn't be so cruel."

"No, no," he said, putting her away from him gently. "That's all serene. Don't you go up-settin' yourself."

She donned her out-door garb.

"Chick," she said, "if you was to play me false over this I'd never forgive you. It'd be too cruel. I should fair crumple up."

"Can't you believe a feller," he exclaimed, "when he tells you the plain honest. Go 'long an' do as I say. An' then, when you

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come back, I'll tell you what's 'appened an' all about it."

He kissed her passionately.

"Now cut away," said he.

She went out. He watched her from the door as she hurried up the street. At the corner she turned and waved her hand to him.

"Pore little devil!" he muttered, half scornful of himself for pitying her. "Dirty! dirty!"

He shook himself impatiently as he returned into the house.

"Now for it!"

He went out into the back-yard and tried the coal-cellar door. He had tried that door on the previous day and found it locked. It was locked now.

"Mighty careful of his coals!" said Marketer, with a leer.

He took a small crowbar from one of his many pockets and prized the door open. It was fitted with a patent lock.

"Thought so," said Marketer.

Since the failure of his last hope he had been cudgelling his brain without intermission to find a way out of his thronging difficulties. He did not doubt for an instant that Cowcross would go straightway and lodge an information against him, and he felt that his only chance of safety lay in immediate flight. But how fly without means? That had been the problem to face.

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Hour after hour, as he paced the streets, he had spent in trying to solve it. And slowly out of his perplexity a desperate resolve was born. It was folly, he knew, to attempt to extort from Fix a sum sufficient to support him in idle seclusion until the hue and cry subsided. He dared not confide to Fix his parlous plight. His first failure had been bad enough, but this second one was the outcome of an unpardonable breach of faith with Fix himself. In his endeavour to plunder on his own account, he had gone behind Fix's back, had tried surreptitiously to seize all the profit for himself. That was dead against the spirit of the long-standing compact between them, and Fix was a man who held rigorously to the conditions of an agreement. No : it were the rankest folly to put any trust in Fix, after betraying him. . . . The knowledge made Marketer the more venomously disposed toward the old receiver. Fix *could* help him, if he chose. He had money. . . . There was the secret of Marketer's inspiration.

Fix had money. Gold. Always forthcoming at a crisis, too. Therefore, he must keep it on the premises. Marketer was learned in the lore of secret hiding-places : it was an essential part of his calling to be so. He had not searched the house for the housebreaking tools without making some discoveries, relegated to a spare chamber of his brain for the time being, but

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readily accessible should he desire to use them. He reviewed the details of his search and his fancy at once lit upon the fast-locked coal cellar. He had had little doubt at the time that it was there Fix kept his treasure ; but he was very single minded : and, housebreaking tools being the immediate object of his quest, he had done no more than take a mental note in passing of the unusual nature of the fastenings of the door. Now the note might prove highly serviceable. Its significance was so plainly apparent. There, in that commonplace receptacle for fuel, lay hidden, perhaps, the means whereby he might yet be enabled not only to loose himself from the thrall of Fix but to put wealth into his own pockets, to enter on a new career of untrammelled liberty—nay, license. He had a vision of himself scattering gold broadcast, ruffling it with the best, drinking, gaming, indulging boundlessly in all those coarse delights which had ever been the darlings of his desire. It was freedom and power—with safety. . . . For, he reasoned closely, the old man dared not acquaint the authorities with his loss : he had always posed as being poor.

He had one scruple, based on that traditional honour among thieves which is not quite extinct even in these company-promoting days. But, he argued, of what use was the money to Fix, who lived only to increase his hoard, not to enjoy

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it? . . . The devil will never lack special pleaders. . . .

Marketer found that his instincts had led him to a true conclusion. The money was in the coal cellar, cunningly concealed. But what man can hide, man can find.

Judith returned from the New Cut torn by the direst imaginings. For the shopman had disclaimed any knowledge of the boots which Marketer had sent her to fetch. She burst into the house, calling out shrilly, "Chick! . . . Chick, dear, where are you?" She rushed distractedly from room to room, but nowhere did she find him.

He was gone. He had forsaken her, leaving no message, no token.

"Oh, cruel! cruel!" she wailed, as she stood in the room they had occupied together. There were traces of his late presence: a few odds and ends, some empty bottles, a pipe that he had failed to find pleasure in.

She sat down. And a slow, white anger began to burn in her. The latent fierce spirit that Cowcross had nourished in her by his fiery fulminations in the old mission hall days, revived. Silently she inveighed against her peccant lover. This last outrage offered to her devotion, her trust, this last degradation of her pride, this open flouting of her, was wholly intolerable and not

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to be borne. That she should have given herself to this vile wretch! this wanton spoiler! this coward and bully of weak women! That she should have shed tears for him! blood of her inmost soul for him! that she should have watched and tended him, and fought with Death itself for his sake! A horrid scorn of herself seared her. The thought of his caresses nauseated her. She had suffered this man! Better, ran the current of her reflections as she stood gazing vacantly into the street with a smile upon her lips, better for him had he hung a millstone about his neck and cast himself into the depths of the sea than he had courted her hatred, her implacable resentment. . . .

When Fix returned, breathless and spent, he found her sitting calmly in the shop with no sign of agitation on her face.

"Chick?" he gasped. "'As he bin 'ere?"

She nodded.

"Where is 'e?"

"I dunno."

"Left the 'ouse, 'as he?"

"Yes."

"That telegram," said Fix. "It wasn't from the Nottin' Dale crib at all. None o' the boys at the ken there knew nothin' about it. An' they ain't so bent on suicide . . . not yet, they ain't . . . to try it on wi' me."

"Who sent it, then?"

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“Chick did.”

“Chick! ’Ow d’you know?”

“I went round to the post-office. Quiet little place. Grocer’s shop. An’ I showed the gel the message an’ I arst her who ’anded it in. I pitched a tale, o’ course. An’ at last she told me. It was him. No doubt about it. She’d got him waxed. ’It ’im off to me, she did, like a photograph.” He removed his hat and ran his fingers through his thin grey hair. “An’ now ’e’s ’ooked it. Say when he’d be back, did he?”

Judith shook her head. “I wasn’t ’ere when he went,” she replied. Then she narrated the circumstances of Marketer’s departure. As she spoke she saw the old man’s face grow livid. His eyes glistened. His lower jaw fell with a jerk into the loose skin of his neck.

“My God!” he wheezed out.

He circled aimlessly about the room, his lean hands wrestling with one another like two bunches of snakes.

“I’ll . . .”

He left her, stumbling and tripping in his haste. She heard the sound of his footsteps hurrying down the passage away from her.

Suddenly an eldritch scream rang through the musty recesses of the house. Then followed a low, piteous wailing, inexpressibly harrowing. She cast aside her needlework and went to see what had happened.

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She found Fix in the cellar, kneeling in the coal dust, his face smeared with black streaks, hideous to behold. A battered, broken iron safe, the door wrenched from its hinges, a ripple of papers flowing out from its interior upon the gleaming floor, lay before him.

TWENTY-FOURTH CHAPTER

MARKETER IN HIDING

THE booms in the harbour still rocked on the swell, though the first fury of the hurricane had subsided. A shrewish wind blew out of the East. The sky was covered with torn clouds of the colour of burnished bronze. A grim-looking gunboat rode in the tumbled offing. Small white skiffs plied to and fro between the ugly black craft and the shore.

It was very cold. The stones still glistened with moisture. Marketer stood shivering, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, watching the welter of water.

He wished he had not come to Glittersea. The place depressed him by its dulness. The esplanade was unspeakably dreary to gaze upon. Only a few rough-clad coastguardsmen and boatmen broke the monotonous empty vista.

His loneliness appalled him, weighed him down. The crashing of the waves against the break-water and the screeching of the shingle in the undertow seemed to tear his nerves to shreds.

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And yet, despite the roar and tumult of the everlasting sea, he felt as if he were enveloped in an aching silence, amid which the ticking of his thoughts beat against the walls of his brain like the swinging clapper of a bell.

He strolled moodily along, wondering what he should do to annihilate the infinite tedium of the hours that still intervened between him and the blessed relief of sleep. He wished that Judith were there to bear him company. He felt very regretful on the score of Judith.

He wandered on in the teeth of the gale, and it grew rapidly dark. The gale was freshening to a second hurricane that swept the land-locked harbour and set the moored boats bowing and scraping as if they danced a minuet. The voice of the storm clamoured thunderously in his ears. Once more, liquid rushes of rain came hurtling spitefully down between each savage gust of wind. The dark surface of the sea was lashed into a lather of foam. The sky deepened in hue until it was as a vast, black void in which earth and sea were merged. It was a night that should have been attuned to Marketer's rancorous mood. He pitted his strength against its fury with a certain sullen pleasure, striving doggedly through the wild commotion, with shrugged shoulders and head down, staggering on the slippery causeways, venting his spleen on the formless forces mightily arrayed to stay his

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purpose. The callous indifference Nature displayed toward his feeble, finite self rankled unreasonably within his breast like the thrust of a rusty sword.

At last he gave up the unequal struggle and turned aside and went into an inn of a ruddy, comfortable interior. A bright fire in the taproom drew him irresistibly. He joined the company there and called for a glass of hot grog, with which he withdrew into the old-fashioned ingle-nook. He had not suspected it, but he was pining for male society. It would have done him good, just then, to rub his wits against tough masculine minds; but instead he sulked and scowled in his corner and said no word to any. Sitting there, with his steaming glass perched insecurely on his knee, he found himself listening to the homely chat of his fellows and forgetting.

But presently a strange restlessness smote him, and he wandered out on to the parade again, marvelling at himself.

What was the matter? he asked of the air. What had come to him? A dread prescience of impending evil, such as he had never felt before, drained the courage clean out of him. He roused himself. He would go back to the town, drink, listen to wild music, shake off these absurd miasmas that flocked like silly ghosts about him.

He strode back with the wind behind him to

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favour his progress, and entered the crooked streets of the thriving seaport.

It happened to be the night in the week on which most of the shops closed early. Thus he found the main thoroughfare thronged with a human tide of idlers. He halted before a pretentious façade, spanned by an arc of gas jets in raucously tinted glass globes, and scanned the flaming placards displayed on either side of the doorway. A jostling crowd was passing into the place. He stood looking on without observing.

"Goin' to treat us?" said a feminine voice in his ear.

The old, familiar Cockney twang, now heard by him for the first time since he had come to that town of soft vowels and slurred consonants, appealed to him irresistibly. He turned and regarded the woman who had laughingly accosted him.

She had dyed hair. Her face was thickly caked with powder and clumsily daubed with rouge. There was a kind of shyness in her manner that her show of effrontery and swaggering gait were powerless to mask. She was pretty, too, and smart—smart, that is, according to his judgment in such matters. Moreover, he was experienced enough to see that here was a novice in the dangerous traffic of frail flesh, and that lent an added piquancy to the girl's rather pathetic charms.

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"Don't mind if I do. What's your name?" he asked her.

"Mord," she replied.

"All right," said he. "But let's go an' 'ave a drink fust."

"We shan't get in," she objected, with unprofessional eagerness to enjoy the full glory of the show within.

He produced a sovereign.

"Think not?" he said, holding it up.

"'Ad a good day, ain't you?" said she.

He dropped the coin back into his pocket with magnificent carelessness.

They went into a public-house hard by, and he shook off his gloom at last. The meaningless phantoms that had frightened him vanished in the rising steam from his reeking glass. Maud was talkative. Her chatter would not have interested him at another time: it dwelt on such complex topics as the general beastliness of Glittersea, the 'orrible weather, the delights of London, and other topics of that kind: but, in his then mood, he had almost a joy in it.

When they returned to the music-hall there was only one man, in greasy evening-dress, to be seen in the vestibule.

"Full up," he remarked curtly.

"Box I want," said Marketer.

The man appraised him in a glance. "Oh, well . . ." he said, doubtfully.

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"I'm not arstin' you, mind, 'ow much it'll cost," Marketer informed him. "Me an' this lady wants a box to ourselves. That's all."

Business was not too brisk, except in the cheaper parts of the house, which were always crowded, and to which the man in the evening dress had mentally allotted them. His manner changed. He conducted them personally to a fusty little cavern on a level with the stage. A waiter entered to inquire their pleasure, and Marketer ordered champagne. The wine, of which he drank an inordinate quantity, warmed and exhilarated him. He braved a cigar and sat there puffing, feeling very well pleased with himself.

The girl was duly impressed, and under the mellowing influence of tobacco, music and vinous exaltation, Marketer condescended to her graciously. This was all very soothing to his feelings after his late penurious experiences in Slant Street. He expanded, grew genial, even noisy. He clapped his hands and applauded the performers behind the footlights so vigorously that he began to divide the attention of the house. The dancers and singers, too, seemed to address their efforts more particularly to him than to the smudgy rows of faces dimly visible in the well of the theatre through a billowy cloud of rank smoke. It was amazing folly that he should make himself thus prominent: but

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this did not occur to him. He was, for the time being, lapped in sensuous content, and, in that mood, impervious to any such disquieting thoughts as had assailed him on the bleak, wind-blown sea front. He ordered up another bottle, rallying his companion on her coyness in drinking. Presently he began to join in the choruses. And then the manager, reluctantly enough, came up to request him politely to abate somewhat of his exuberance.

"That's all right," said he, after a moment's deliberation, in which he was divided between asking the manager to have a drink and knocking him down. "You're a good boy. Give us your 'and."

His head was buzzing and whirling. The antic figures on the stage were blurred and swollen to his view. The face of Maud seemed afar off. Her voice came to him like a voice in a dream.

"Let's go out," he said abruptly. "Nea'ly all over now."

She rose and took his arm. They threaded interminable red-lined passages and came at last to the street. The wind blew coldly in, fluttering the gas-jets. Marketer shivered and emerged abruptly from his semi-stupid state.

"'Ot in there," he said, taking off his hat.

The cold, rude caress of the rain-laden gale, blustering down the narrow way, smote upon their heated faces. The pavements were gleam-

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ing wet, and bright with jagged radiant splashes. Marketer buttoned up his coat in the shelter of the portico.

“Come along, dear,” said the girl.

But he was peering across the road. Suddenly he wrenched himself free of her restraining clutch, so roughly that he almost threw her down, and darted across the puddled road. A figure that had been standing motionless on the opposite side of the way broke cover at his tempestuous onset, doubled nimbly, and darted down one of the narrow cross-passages leading deviously to the beach. Marketer essayed to follow the figure, but it was dark and he was confused. The girl had run quickly after him.

“What’s the matter, dear?” she asked.
“Who was that?”

He laughed, rather horribly.

“My mistake,” he said, huskily. “But I thought . . .”

TWENTY-FIFTH CHAPTER

THE TRIUMPH OF COWCROSS

ON the following day, about noon, Judith went out to do a little humble shopping. For there is no indulgence in the luxury of woe permitted to the poor. Bellies must be filled though hearts break, and bargains driven though life itself has lost its savour. On returning home she found a visitor sitting in the parlour with Fix. At another time she would have been overcome, but now nothing seemed to matter, and it was almost with indifference she greeted him as she set down her basket.

He lifted his gaze to her face as he rose and took her limp hand. And she could not but be struck by the profound change in him. He was bent and broken as a man of seventy. His cheeks were hollow, his nose and chin tended sharply toward each other. The skin of his face was wrinkled and yellow as a walnut shell. But his eyes were brighter than they had been: the fingers that closed about hers seemed supple and strong as steel. His expression had a very

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hunger of intensity : his manner was concentrated and decisive as that of some eager young crusader.

“ How do you do, Judith ? ” he said, infusing a real solicitude into the formal words.

“ All gay,” she answered listlessly.

“ Peter has come,” said Fix slowly, “ about . . . him.”

“ Chick ? ”

“ Ah,” said Fix. “ He knows where he is, too. Never you fear, my dear, we’ll ’ave that dirty dog by the ’eels yet. We’ll make him pay for the damage he’s done, ’fore he’s many days older, an’ make him pay dear, too, or I’m a blessed curick.”

“ You know where he is ? ” cried Judith.

“ I have been on his track,” said Cowcross, “ for the past two months or more. I have not been able always to keep him under observation ; but I have been fairly successful. Fairly. He has gone to few places that I could not point out to you. He has done little that I am not aware of. No shadow could have been more faithful to him in his comings and goings than I. And, until two days ago, he has been all unsuspecting of my surveillance. He has swaggered and blustered along on his way to the Pit knowing nothing of the Nemesis for ever dogging his footsteps. That Nemesis embodied in me. He discovered that I was following him by an accident

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the other night when he went to break into the house of those good people who are taking care of poor little Deuce—my child, given to me of God, though not born to me of the flesh. He was beaten there. He would have been beaten, I verily believe, by his own craven heart if no other obstacle had arisen to prevent his wickedness succeeding.”

He paused to clear his throat. His speech, though his voice had grown parched and hoarse, was stilted and precise as ever. But there was a note of deliberate hate sounding through the even tenor of his level utterances now that had been missing from his old style of perfervid declamation, yet it was infinitely more terrible to hear. Judith felt all her late dislike of the cobbler again forcing itself up to the surface of her mind. She could have shuddered as she listened. But she strove to control the unworthy weakness, as she deemed it, insisting on it to herself that here she had an ally after her own heart, a ready instrument that in justice to her own outraged womanhood she should mould if she could to her will, and employ to the furtherance of a just vengeance on the vile lover who had treated her with such infamous wantonness of cruelty.

“Yes?” she said, tapping softly on the floor with her foot.

“’Alf a minute,” said Fix. “I’ll leave you two together now to talk this over in private,

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if you don't mind. My dear," he said to Judith, "Peter's wuth listenin' to." With which cryptic remark he rose and quitted the room.

"Where is—he?" asked Judith, knotting her hands together in her lap.

"I saw him but last night," replied Cowcross. "He is staying at Glittersea. It was on the day before that I followed him to the station. I had not taken a ticket as I did not know his destination. But the train only stopped three times, and at each stopping place I kept an eye on the platform to see that he did not elude me. Glittersea is a terminus. At the station before Glittersea they came to collect tickets. . . . But these details are immaterial. . . . He lodged the first night at a respectable inn. During the day, an unusually stormy one, he spent his time innocently enough. In the evening he went to a music-hall. Not alone."

"Not alone?" echoed Judith.

"He went with a woman. I have not lately been used to visiting such places; but I broke my rule last night. I stood at the back of the audience. He sat in a box, drinking wine with the woman, and behaving riotously. He had his arm about her waist. Once he kissed her, and the people execrated him for his shamelessness, even those sons of Belial; but he, wrapped in the blind self-sufficiency of lust and intoxication, cared nothing for their open condemnation

THE TRIUMPH OF COWCROSS

of his conduct, though even the time-serving manager, as I perceived distinctly, had to remonstrate with him. At last he rose to leave the place. I slipped out first and watched for him from the opposite side of the street. He appeared at last. With the woman. He was clinging to her for support. Suddenly he saw me and tried to lay hands on me. But I eluded him. . . . When he had given up searching for me, I followed again upon his sin-marked trail. I did not once lose sight of him."

"Did the woman go with him?"

"They went together to a house of ill-fame, and there they stayed all night. This I know, because I watched in the wind and rain until it was morning."

"Is he still with 'er?"

"I have no doubt he is. But I left Glittersea by the first train to acquaint you with the truth. I was fully aware . . . I am so still . . . that my action lays me open to a painful misconception. It must seem to you that all my intent is to discredit your lover to you. I will only defend myself to the extent of saying that that is not the correct view for you to take of the matter. I was, I trust, actuated by higher motives than mere self-gratification. It was to save you from the evil machinations of this man, to point out to you the full extent of his iniquity, that I have devoted my days to watching him.

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I ask no reward beyond the approval of my conscience, and the knowledge that I have served you faithfully."

Yet, admitting this, she must avert her face before she could address him.

"This is true?" she faltered.

"You know that I do not lie."

"An' what . . . what d'you think . . . ought to 'appen now?"

"I wish," said he, "to take you with me to Glittersea to-day to confront you with him and his mistress."

"What'd be the use o' that?"

"Afterwards," he went on, "I shall make it my duty to denounce him to the authorities for what he is . . . not only a robber but a murderer."

"'E is not . . ." she began defiantly, then the words died on her lips.

"He is a murderer. I know it. I suspect you know it, too. Yet you would shield him. Judith!"

His voice at last expressed poignant feeling.

"I will come wi' you," said she. "But if I do you must promise some'ing an' I will promise you some'ing, too. I mean, if we find out you've made a mistake you won't be 'ard on him, but let him go. If you're right . . . then . . ."

A spot of colour flamed in one of his cheeks, though the rest of his face remained colourless.

THE TRIUMPH OF COWCROSS

He got up from his chair, crossed over to her, and gripped her hands.

"You would be *my* wife? You would fulfil your old promise?"

"I . . ." She tried to drag her hands away. "I s'pose so."

"Our love," said he, "shall be devoted to——"

But she wrenched herself from his detaining clutch.

"Don't," she said.

"Ah! but you will keep your word this time?" he pleaded.

"Let us wait. . . . Don't talk any more, I've stood about as much as I'm able to. If you bother me——"

"No," he rejoined, "I will trust you—again."

Bill Fix, who was still a rich man, despite Marketer's theft, supplied the money for the expenses of their journey. It was evening when they alighted at Glittersea Station. The storm had subsided, but the sea was still rough. Big rollers broke on the shingles and drove a hail of spindrift across the wide parade. Cowcross engaged a room for Judith over a small news-agent's shop.

"But where'll you stay?" she asked him.

"The Lord will provide for me," he replied.

"Have no fear on that score."

And she was too weary and too indifferent to his welfare to trouble further about him.

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They ate a little food and then she accompanied him into the town. The music-hall in the High Street was already opened. The man in the soiled evening clothes was lounging in the vestibule as on the night before. Cowcross accosted him.

"Our eccentric friend here to-night?" he inquired, with a pitiful attempt at jocosity.

"What eccentric friend?" asked the man, ungraciously.

"The gentleman with the lady, who occupied the box?"

"Oh, him," said the man with a grin. "No, he ain't turned up as yet. I see him, hour or two ago, though, with his madam. Down on the front."

"Thank you," said Cowcross politely, and returned to Judith.

"He is not there," he told her. "But he is still staying in the town."

"An' *her*?" queried Judith.

"She is with him. . . . Now my plan is," Cowcross continued, all unaware that she was not heeding him in the least, "My plan is: To walk up and down the more busy streets as long as the public-houses remain open. In that way we are bound to come across him"—they neither of them mentioned Marketer's name at any time—"if they are out of doors. And my knowledge of him leads me to believe that he will be abroad

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somewhere, probably drinking himself into that state which can be the only peaceful state for him."

"Don't run him down too much, y'know," said Judith sharply.

He sighed and was silent.

It was a weary business, promenading the dull, insufficiently lighted streets, hour after hour. And soon Judith began to feel acutely the absurdity of their conduct. She felt that she had permitted her half-crazed companion to make an arrant fool of her. And yet, despite her spleen, she began to feel vaguely glad as time passed and nothing occurred to break the monotony of their vigil.

The air was bitterly inclement. There were occasional showers of stinging raindrops.

Cowcross at last took her to the house to which he had traced Marketer and the woman on the previous night.

"There is nothing for it, I fear," said Cowcross, "but for us to wait here until they come home."

"S'posin they're in the 'ouse all the time?" Judith said.

"They are not. They occupy the first floor. I saw her pull down the blind last night. And as you see the only light shown is in the parlour window . . . which would hardly be a bedroom," he added quietly.

"S'posin' they've left the town altogether."

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"No. They are still here. The only train that has left this place since we came into it left at 8.30. And as you remember, we saw that back into the station, and moreover we saw it depart."

She resigned herself to the inevitable with a deep-drawn sigh.

"No," said he. "We have them. Even if they have left these lodgings they cannot elude us. We will be in the station—one or the other of us—whenever a train leaves."

They waited on in the cold and damp until the clocks chimed the half hour after ten, at which time all the shops were shut up for the day, including the inns. Still their quarry did not appear.

Hope revived in Judith's heart. What if Marketer were not guilty after all? There might possibly be awaiting her in London some message from him telling her his whereabouts. Cowcross was not "right." It was possible that he had allowed his imagination to take control of his reason. Fervently she prayed that this might prove to be the case. . . . Oh, what a fool she had been to listen to this stupid, spiteful old man! Her dislike of Cowcross warmed to detestation. She felt a glow of triumphant delight as she noted his growing discomfiture as the minutes crept on and still there was no sign of those they looked for.

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“ You bin an’ made a mistake,” she said at last, scornfully. “ Let’s ’op it. I’m perished. No good stickin’ ’ere all night.”

“ No, no,” he implored her. “ Wait a little longer. You will see them yet.” He gripped her wrist tightly.

“ I’m off,” she said. “ Let go.”

He suddenly released her, but not at her bidding.

“ Back in the shadow . . . quick ! ” he cried.

Her heart died in her breast. A bitterness as of death swept over her. She hated Cowcross at that moment with a virulence that made his proximity repulsive to her flesh.

Marketer and the woman had turned a corner some fifty yards away. His figure and hers were merged together in a formless black shape that blundered along erratically, staggering from side to side of the uneven side-walk. His arm was wound about her neck ; his cheek rested against hers. And as they drew nearer his voice could be heard : broken, high-pitched, the incredibly foolish voice of a drunken man. She was laughing at him and remonstrating with him. He was hiccupping silly endearments.

Judith stood and watched them.

“ See ! ” cried Cowcross, gloating over the bestial spectacle. “ There is your lover ! ”

She shook off the hand he had placed on her shoulder.

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The man and the woman passed into the house. The door was shut upon them. Once again the scene was deserted.

There was a long pause. Judith seemed to hear, above the roar of the rolling sea down there on the weed-strewn beach, sounds as of tears of blood dripping fast from her heart. Disordered images rioted in her brain . . . of him and Cowcross, their faces arrayed side by side against her, and other commonplace faces and things were interposed between in a wildly disordered jumble.

“ Judith,” whispered Cowcross.

She turned from him, raging against the conviction of her lover's turpitude that he had forced upon her. Her chin dropped to her breast. She stood there, rocking herself from side to side.

“ You must love him all the more now,” said Cowcross with sudden, bitter insight.

“ Gawd, no ! ” she cried, her hands buried in her bosom as if they would rend it asunder. She thrust her face into his. Her hot breath seemed to sear his cheek. There was a thin, white line of foam on her lips. “ I 'ate him ! ”

“ Hate him ? ” he sneered.

“ I never knew what it was to 'ate anybody before,” she said, ignorant in her distraction that it was not her lover whom she hated. “ It fair frightens me. It burns me up. I shall

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never rest for it. Never. I ain't never felt nothing like it in my life before. It . . . Oh, if he only was dead! To think of him bein' alive . . . an' that woman . . . she'll laugh at me when he tells her!" She put an iron hand of constraint on her fury. Her mouth was twisted awry. "I reckon I was born a bit late," she remarked. "Don't seem to belong to these times at all. Everything's so rotten. . . . One man . . . an' this! . . . If you 'ad done 'alf to me what he's done, I'd get a man to strike you dead as I'd like to see him struck dead . . . an' I'd pay the man. But you're not like him." This he might have accepted as a tribute to his worth, but that she flayed him with the scorn of her eyes. "If you was, you wouldn't ha' let me go. You'd ha' killed him first."

He stood intently regarding her.

"You ain't a proper man at all," she said with slow contempt. "If you was you wouldn't sneak about an' pry like you do. You . . . you wouldn't go an' peach, like a stinkin' nark!"

Their eyes met and crossed and flashed like two challenging blades.

"No?" he said, showing his uneven teeth. "What would I do then?"

"If you don't know," she replied, "I can't tell you."

TWENTY-SIXTH CHAPTER

ON THE CLIFFS

THE floor was speckled with sunshine when Cowcross awoke in his lodging on the following morning. He sprang up with a start and consulted the clock upon the mantelpiece. He had lost a goodly part of the morning. But he felt not at all rested, for all his long sleep. His limbs were stiff and sore : his head hummed and buzzed painfully as if it contained a swarm of bees. He dressed and laved his hands and face. The cold shock of the water refreshed and stimulated him. He shaved himself carefully as he reviewed his plans for the day.

It was a bright morning. The pale sky held a promise of continued fineness. The sunshine was shifting and faint. There was a thin mist on the sea.

It was well that he should breakfast. He went downstairs and tapped at his landlady's door. It opened and a very little kitchen was revealed, the firelight striking flashing gleams from the hanging crockery and tinware on the dresser.

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At a groaning table the landlady's husband, a big swart clodbody, was spooning the contents of a big bowl into himself. He gave Cowcross a civil "Good-mornin' t' ye, sur," which seemed to imply a certain envy of Cowcross as one not condemned to work on such a bright day for pleasure. Cowcross looked at the swarm of tow-headed children clamouring about him, and had an envy of the man, fierce, strong, almost tear-compelling. What would he not have given at that moment to exchange his own passion-broken lot for this placid homely one? His landlady, perspiring, flushed, a little dishevelled, cleared her face of a worried pucker to attend to his wants. He went upstairs with a clearer perception of what he had missed of the true meaning of life than any picture but that crowded domestic scene could possibly have shown him.

An hour later he left the house. Judith had stipulated that they should not meet until the evening. She would wait for him in her room. The blanks he had filled in out of his sub-consciousness.

His first business that morning was transacted in a tool shop. He produced a cobbler's case-knife from his pocket and laid it on the counter.

"I want another one exactly like that, please," he said to the shopman.

The man flicked open the blade : an ugly thing,

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sharp and two-edged. He ran his thumb along the edge.

"Yes, sir," he said. "To shave with?" and he laughed.

"To mend soles with," answered Cowcross, and he laughed also.

"Yes, sir."

Cowcross tried the second knife, measured it against his own, felt the two points, and felt the blade.

"This will do," he said. He put down his money, slipped the two knives into his pocket, and left the shop.

He went straightway to the house where Marketer was staying with the woman. He took up a coign of observation about a furlong away. The house stood somewhat apart from its neighbours at the end of a newly-made road. Cowcross watched it, sitting on a disused windlass, with his hat drawn down well over his eyebrows.

For several hours he waited there in the cold, bright sunshine.

Meanwhile, within the house, Marketer lay tossing on his bed. His racket had resulted inevitably in an utter collapse of nerve and fibre. He lay there, quaking and damp with sweat, a prey to nameless fears and bodily anguish.

The woman had risen at an early hour and prepared his breakfast and brought it to him. And he had waved it away with a curse.

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“All I get for tryin’ to do you a bit o’ good,” she complained.

He had told her to go and do various unpleasant things to herself, and she had flounced out of the room in a fury of indignation. For awhile the noise of her movements in the adjoining room had continued to torment him. Presently she peeped in on him, fully dressed. Her anger had departed.

“I’m goin’ out, dear,” she said, “to get you a chicken or some’ing to make some broth with for you. You lay there. I shan’t be long.”

And she rustled downstairs.

He was glad to be rid of her. He would be gone when she came back. He realised his folly in having stayed in Glittersea so long after having been seen by Cowcross. It had been the woman’s fault. God! He was tired of her, utterly tired. . . . If only Judith were there to nurse him. He recalled the cool caress of her hand upon his forehead, her soft voice and quiet movements. Poor little thing! He groaned in his agonised loneliness. He wondered if it were possible for him to win her back, if some means might be devised whereby . . .

But the afternoon was drawing on. He must get up at once if he would escape the woman. He felt too sick to undergo the ordeal of washing or even of dressing with any care. He wished that he had not troubled to take off his clothes on the

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previous night. The necessity of wearing boots was a great nuisance, too, each eyelet for the laces requiring a separate and distinct oath. At last he was dressed in some slovenly wise and went downstairs. He settled his account with the evil-faced man who kept the establishment—a being too astute to ask questions—and went out.

He felt exceedingly limp and weak as he emerged in the full light of day. For the mists of the morning had vanished, and the air was filled with a blinding glare of frosty, wind-whipped sunshine. It was Saturday, and the work-folk, disengaged from toil, were taking full advantage of the spell of fine weather. The aimless jollity of the idle crowds, their vacuous faces and unwonted holiday attire, the suspended dignity of the adults, the riotous gladness of the children, these were things out of the focus of his mood. He passed through the murmurous tumult, along beside the harbour with its dark lines of booms still tossing monotonously on the tide, and entered the saloon bar of an hotel overlooking the sea.

There he drank hot brandy until he was somewhat revived and could nibble a sandwich. But he told himself solemnly that he must cry off the liquor that day: it was high time, if he would preserve himself.

He looked at a time-table and left the hotel.

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He had a sudden longing to get out of the colour and movement of the town, away from the jostling hordes of silly gapers who harassed and irritated him by their airs of self-complacency. Away into the wide, fair solitudes beyond, lifting green heights to westward.

By way of congeries of half-built houses and puddled weed-grown building plots, he came at last upon an undulating sweep of meadow-land rising to the sheer edge of the cliff.

It was a scene of sylvan solitude that encompassed him. The lonely headland cut off from view the town he had left behind. Everywhere the verdant fields stretched away serenely peaceful under the melting blue. He strolled on through flocks of fat sheep that would not stir until he came within a yard of them, and cattle that stubbornly stuck in his path so that he could smell, as he passed, the hot rank odour of their steaming bodies. Diving up and down in eccentric swoops and lunges along the line of the cliff's edge, a school of gulls bore him screaming company. Overhead, wheeling and cawing, went a colony of ragged black rooks with some young birds of a rusty brown colour streaming away in their wake.

He sat down on a rough wooden bench and gazed out over the shifting sea. A haze was stealing up over the waters out of the horizon. The steep climb had winded him, and he was

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trembling from his exertions. He was grateful for the calmness and coolness brooding there. He felt at peace, and a little regretful for many things.

Night was falling fast now. The red sun had gone down to her sleep on a bed of purple flowers. Over toward the east one lone bright star hung twinkling. And lo! even as he gazed, a dozen other lesser stars came out to bear her company.

He shivered, rose to depart. And, turning, came face to face with Cowcross.

He was so startled that he lost for a moment his grip on actualities, to float away into a state of detachment from himself in which his finite surroundings and the apparition confronting him faded into dim shadows as of things seen afar off.

"I have found you?" said Cowcross.

Marketer strove hard to rally the shattered resources of his old masterful personality.

"After me again, are you," he said. "Didn't I give you enough to go on with last time?"

But he was afraid for all his seeming boldness.

"My first idea was," Cowcross went on, speaking evenly and quietly, "to hand you over to justice. But I have altered my mind."

"Kind o' you, I'm sure," said Marketer. "What for?"

"Murder, among other things," was the unexpected reply.

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Marketer mumbled his dry lips. "Must be off your nut, I should think."

"But I'm not going to hand you over to justice. No. That is to say, I am not going to hand you over to man's justice."

"Whose, then? Woman's?"

"No. The justice of God."

"Pr'aps," said Marketer, with unconscious pathos, "He won't be so hard on me as the law would."

"Blaspheming wretch!" cried Cowcross. "You, who should be kneeling and praying now——"

"What! on this damp grass!" He laughed. "'Ere get out of it, I'm goin' back into the town for a bit. I'm cold."

"No," said Cowcross. "You are never going back."

"Who'll stop me?"

"I will."

"An' who'll you get to 'elp you?"

As he uttered the words he bore down on the older man with a sudden impetuous rush. Cowcross eluded his clutch and edged rapidly away from him. Marketer plunged again and again in his direction, but each time Cowcross dodged him. At last Cowcross fairly turned tail and fled, fumbling at a side pocket as he ran. Marketer thundered after him, but the bulk and the sorry condition of the evil-liver were all

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against him in this trial of speed with the agile, spare ascetic. He soon relinquished the fruitless pursuit, and stood panting on the slippery edge.

"Why don't you stop me?" he asked, tauntingly.

"I will," replied Cowcross, and withdrew his hand from his pocket.

There was the click of a spring, and Marketer saw a white knife-blade flash out in the gathering dusk. He was not greatly daunted. Physical danger had no terrors for him. He thought it would be an easy matter suddenly to spring upon the other man and wrest his weapon from him.

"'Ere, Peter, don't be a fool," he said. "We used to be the best o' pals." He advanced toward Cowcross as he spoke.

Cowcross passed the knife to his left hand, and plunged his right hand once more into his pocket. Click! and in either knotted fist glinted a blade of steel.

"Ain't you got a fork?" Marketer inquired, joking desperately, though he began to feel that the old madman's antics might indeed spell death for him.

"Don't be a fool," he said again. "Put them things down."

To Marketer's amazement Cowcross partially complied with this request by tossing one of the knives toward him. Describing a glittering arc

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in its flight it fell on its point and stuck quivering in the earth with silver scintillations. Marketer stooped and secured it, without hesitation.

"Now we're quits," he shouted, crooking his arm terribly in the hope that thereby he might frighten his eccentric adversary.

"Yes, we are quits now," Cowcross said. "For I am no cowardly assassin as you are. I am a man. I will fight you as man to man, dog though you are in heart and life. And God shall decide between us."

Marketer was now at the last ebb of exasperation, alike at this crazy fool's incredible proposal, which he could hardly consider gravely yet, and also for the humiliation that Cowcross put upon him by making him a ridiculous partner in his folly. That they two should go chasing one another up and down those majestic slopes like a pair of conies galled his very real, if somewhat grotesque, notions of personal dignity. Yet that he could not disregard the deadly intent of this inept old cobbler-turned-preacher-turned-lunatic he realised very clearly.

"Look 'ere, Peter, do 'ave some sense about you," he expostulated. "If I take you at your word an' fight this 'ere silly duel wi' you what'll be the result? S'posin' you come off best? You'd be pinched an' scragged as safe as 'ouses. At any rate, you'd be put in stir for the rest o' our natural."

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"It is possible—for the ways of God are inscrutable—that you may prevail over me," said Cowcross.

"No," said Marketer, "I shouldn't like to kill you. Thump in the jaw's about the limit o' what I'd do."

"Ah, what a coward this thing is," Cowcross cried to the sky. "Afraid for its life, afraid to fight, it tries to fasten the stigma of murder on me."

"You know dam' well I'm not a coward," said Marketer. "You know dam' well I ain't. But what's the use of it, as I say?"

"One happy result! . . . I shall marry Judith."

"You! That's about the 'ealthiest lie I've 'eard, that is."

But Cowcross's leer of secret security in his position disturbed Marketer to the deeps. His ready jealousy was kindled in an instant.

"She is down there . . . in the town," cried Cowcross in mocking exultation. "I brought her here. She saw you last night. With the scarlet woman. And she has promised herself to me. . . . That does not matter. It is sufficient for me to know that she bears the marks of your brutality upon her and has sent me here to punish you."

"Punish me!" said Marketer grimly. "Punish me, eh?"

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He stood regarding Cowcross intently,^f his great bulk outlined blackly against the sky. His face was hardly visible to the other.

"By God!" he said slowly. "I'll settle wi' you for that, Peter."

Cowcross stamped upon the ground. "Fight, then," he said, and raised his right arm.

With the quick instinct of self-preservation, Marketer raised his own right arm also. But he stood quite still and erect. Then, on a sudden, he sprang toward the crouching dark figure of his insane antagonist. Cowcross leaped aside, clutched at Marketer's sleeve as he swung down the hill, and plunged his knife deep into his side. The stricken man uttered a strangled shriek, then toppled down face forward on the short, crisp grass.

TWENTY-SEVENTH CHAPTER

THE REWARD

THE sound of Marketer's death cry had seemed to startle the stillness and silence into sudden movement and sound. A covey of dark birds rose in a cloud from the furrowed field to the right. The hovering gulls went streaming and screaming seaward. Over the rounded brow of the incline, fat bodies of sheep bobbed up jerkily one by one and disappeared. Against the plumbago blue of the sky a great horned cow stood out, with her neck outstretched, sniffing the little billows of mist that floated up to her. She lowed, and at her lowing there was an outburst of bleats, the deep staccato barking of a lonely sheep dog, a harsh din of birds. All Cowcross's senses seemed quickened. The light and shade of the darkling prospect showed crudely, vividly. A hundred trivial objects, hitherto disregarded, leapt at once into strong prominence: a broken fragment of rail, cow-clats, a curious chalky fissure in the turf running from him with fatal intent toward that dark mass on the grass where

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the dead man lay. He had a numbness of the brain that stayed thought and transformed him into a passive, quivering instrument keenly receptive of impressions. From contemplation of near details he passed to a more ample outlook, embracing all the wide scape and sky: the patterned pastures, three furlongs away, clothed in luminous mist, bright eyes of yellow light peeping out from clumps of trees, the line of the railway like a straight, grey scar, cleaving relentlessly through the sleek fields, a tiny train like a long glow-worm under a plume of amber-tinted smoke, hurtling toward a muddle of signals—yellow, red, and green. That tumult of animal sounds died slowly down, dwindled to an occasional protesting bark or bleat. Outlines seemed to become less stark, to resume their normal vagueness. He felt a gush of returning life at his heart, a renewed sense of thought in his brain.

A faintness of horror assailed him. The knife dropped from his hand. He groped forward, stumbling blindly over each small tussock of grass or cluster of stones, until he came to the fallen form of Marketer. He fell on his knees beside him, and so weak and unsteady was he, he lost his balance and rolled over on his side, the stiff grass pricking his cheek. He was feebly aware, all the while, of uttering a low, murmuring sound, a crooning whimper of distress.

Marketer lay huddled on one shoulder, his

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arms flung out limply above his head, his face nosing the earth. Cowcross stooped over him. Then something seemed to snap in his head with a loud clap, and for a space he lost his hold on things.

When he came to himself again he had turned the body over and was dabbling his hand in a clotted patch of cold, sticky blood on his ribs. Marketer was quite dead. It would seem, from the look on his face, that he had died instantly and without pain : the look was one of entreating protest, tinged by surprise. His hat had rolled away, and the blackness of the grizzled hair enhanced the stricken pallor of his flesh. His lips were slightly parted. . . .

Never had the spoilt fineness of the man, his strength and his rough beauty, shone forth more manifest. A great despair, a great remorse, fell on Cowcross.

Why had he killed him ? Why—if God be Judge of all ? He seemed to see all things clearly now, as a man newly awakened from a dream. Why ? Ah, God ! if we could but read the motives of our evil deeds, they never would be done. *He* stood revealed to himself at last as the victim—he, the holy man ! as the victim of a mingled madness of passion, pique, jealousy : of a petty resentment of the pitiless truth that Marketer had forced upon him by convicting him of age and sourness : of a desire to vindicate

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a puny dignity that Marketer had roused with his strong, brutal common sense. . . . It was for these poor reasons he had sent to his grave the man who had once been his friend.

It was not from the mangled corpse that he fled down the hill, but from himself. The night was full of voices whispering when he fell to a walk, roaring angrily when he ran. He could tell himself it was but the wind in his ears that he heard : his fears were not lessened thereby. He could halt and mark how the voices ceased. That only terrified him the more, for he dared not go on again then, and bring the buzzing horde about his head once more. And these foul devils who harassed him now and yelled their mockery at him were the same who had urged him on to kill Marketer. Poor Marketer ! . . . Chick ! . . . whom he had once liked so well with the shamefaced man-to-man love of man. The tears fell fast down his face, flaying his hot cheeks to a salt coldness.

Marketer was lost to him. He had destroyed the real treasure of his friendship as a wilful, passionate child destroys an unsatisfactory toy. He was consumed with self-pity. And Fear . . . a miserable, craven fear of punishment . . . an unspeakable fear, the Fear of Death, was on him too. He busied his mind with schemes of escape, and in that mean mental exercise found temporary surcease from his terrors.

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He must enter the town by some circuitous route. He must not be seen coming down directly from the place where his victim lay. And he must hurry. He must get as far from the deadly cliffs as possible and exhibit himself publicly, show himself unconcerned and debonair, the careless holiday-maker bent only on pleasure. Unconsciously he fell into a dawdling saunter, trimmed his beard with his fingers. . . .

Then he surprised himself by laughing aloud. These were no traits of his. He was but mimicking the foibles of some brainless young man. No, he must be himself, not some other person. Himself? But how hard it was to recall that self! He tried to remember what was his usual demeanour . . . and could not. His forehead and the palms of his hands grew damp. How should he dare ever again to meet the regard of his fellow-men?

"I'll put that aside," he said, "I can't be bothered."

For he was infinitely weary, and all his faculties were blunted. He passed his hand across his forehead and a smell of blood sickened his nostrils. His fingers were stiffly caked with a loathly brown stain. He shook to think that he might have gone into the light with those damning traces upon him. He must wash his hands. He must see to it that there were no similar marks

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on his clothes. What a fool he had been to touch the corpse !

He ran about looking for water. But he could find none anywhere. He must go down to the sea. There was a deep chasm in the cliffs a little farther on. He might be able to get down to the beach by way of that. He broke into a run. And all the accusing voices of the night screeched in his ears again.

Still he went on, and presently the chasm yawned before him : a black void dimly dotted with great white blots where masses of chalk and silt had slipped and crumbled together. He followed the edge of the gulf inland, and presently the banks grew shallower. He saw a shelving, broken path running up toward him from the spumy margin of the sea. The booming of the waves on the sullen sands was faintly audible. Impatiently he leaped down.

The drop was deeper than he had reckoned. He alighted on a loose patch of stones and chalk and weed-woven earth, tumbled on to his head and knees, and then fell sprawling : a torrent of dry morsels hopping down pell-mell to the beach below. For an instant he had a vision of his own helpless carcass following those flying morsels down the steep decline. Then, cautiously, he got upon his feet and began the descent, propping himself on his hands from behind.

He won to the beach at last, and stood in the

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shadow of the tall, frowning cliffs with the salt breeze on his face. The moon swam regally on high with the stars for her maids of honour clustering about her. And all across the waste of water she flung her fairy veil.

He stooped and rinsed his hands in the crisping waves. He looked to see if there were any stains upon his clothes, but the light was treacherous, and there was scanty comfort in that he could find none. Forgetful of his original purpose, his object now was to get back to Glittersea at once and by the most direct path. From the beach he could see the lights of the esplanade, and started off at a halting trot toward them. Presently he struck upon a narrow paved way running through the sands, and progress being easier now he fell to a laboured walk.

He began to meet stray stragglers from the town, idle solitaires, lovers head to head. At first he could scarce refrain from shrieking as they passed. But as they seemed to heed him not at all, he grew momentarily more confident.

At last he entered the borders of the town. It was crowded on that fine night almost as in the heyday of the season. All along the broad parade and out upon the pier throngs of chatterers strolled. There was music of string and reed and brass, of human voices, of the sea upon the fore-shore and the wind upon the sea. Far out in the roadstead, ships were riding to anchor, showing

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their red port lights. Beyond, on a jutting piece of land, a flashing lance of radiance swung swiftly through the dark. He had a lively appreciation of the beauty of it all, of the glad innocence of the crowd that moved in it, and of his own pariah state.

A forlorn sense of weakness and loneliness oppressed him. The tears came, stinging and blurring his eyes. He uttered a riving sob. And underlying his wretchedness was a nameless dread of what lay yet before him, a feeling of panic, a longing to get away from this place of his undoing.

A beggar whined at his elbow. "No bed . . . no food!"

And no knowledge of a bloody corpse up there on that gloomy headland, thought Cowcross. He laughed at the beggar's plaint.

A girl passed him looking tearfully into the scowling white face of her lover. Doubtless she fancied that none carried a heavier burden of woe than she held in her bruised heart. . . . If she could but see, as Cowcross had seen, the pale dead face of Marketer upturned accusingly to the watching stars! He had a feeling of strange exaltation in the grim magnificence of his state.

He walked on briskly.

At that point where the esplanade ended abruptly and the harbour began, the town underwent a change of aspect, sloughing its irresponsible

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airs for more serious ones of business. Instead of frivolous sand and shingle there were quays and docks, dipping sheer to the water: bathing machines gave place to the mighty hulls of ships poking their bowsprits across a highway cluttered with hawsers and chains and ring-bolts. As he passed through this wilderness of industry, the pitchy, fishy odours wafted to his nostrils reminded him, incongruously enough, of the old fish suppers that Judith and he and Deuce had used to enjoy together.

Her image filled his heart again, paling the phantoms that had ridden him, driving them away. He would return to her at once and claim his reward. He thought of the dead man not regretfully now, but with a glow of cruel triumph in the knowledge that at last he could no longer dispute his love with the love that Judith bore him. Before another day dawned he would take her back to London and the dear little cobbler's shop, where they might pick up the dropped threads of the old life again. He looked up at the harbour clock. There was still time in which to catch the last up-train. Her lodging was near at hand now. He quickened his pace.

He found the entrance to the news-shop blocked by loafers, some lolling against the two door-jambs, some shouldering the windows in the hulking, aimless fashion of rough-faring man.

THE REWARD

The door was open, but the gas in the shop had been lowered to a tiny blue glimmer, so that their faces showed but dimly. If there had been aught extraordinary in his appearance they could not have remarked it. He felt that he was favoured of fate, and had a new access of boldness. Some one out of the mirk said drily: "Nice weather for moonlight bathing, sir." He tried to force a laugh that should seem easy and unaffected. To his dismay, no sound came. He cleared his throat.

"Yes," said he at last in a voice so broken and husky that he hardly knew it for his own. "Yes." He tried to think of something else to say, but his wits had forsaken him. "You see," he went on, and his voice seemed to saw through the silence horribly, "you see . . ." He pondered. "You see, I want to catch the last train up. Yes. The last train up." He had an inexplicable tendency to snigger.

"Want to come by?" some one asked him. "I say . . . mind!"

The stranger clutched Cowcross's sleeve. For the old man had suddenly reeled back into the thick of them. There was a smothered laugh as he recovered himself and went wading his way through their midst with a deliberation that even to his own perceptions was grotesque.

A fat matronly figure bobbed out upon him.) "Is that Mr. Cowcross?"

THE SPOILERS

It was the landlady's voice.

"Yes," he answered, with a qualm of fear.

"Ha! Your daughter, sir, is in, sir. Been inquirin' for you all day, she has, sir."

He repeated stupidly, "Inquiring for me?"

"Will you go up?"

"Go up? Yes."

He clutched the thin, rickety handrail, and staggered heavily upstairs. He heard the men whispering below, and a laugh or two. The fools thought he was drunk. That did not matter. They might have put a far worse interpretation on his antics. But how was it he had failed so abjectly to play his part? He must not lose his nerve again in that way.

A band of light fell athwart the dim passage as a door was opened a little way ahead of him. The figure of Judith stepped out. She stood boldly apparent in that falling flood of brightness, her head turned sharply toward him.

"Is it you at last?" she said in a shaking voice.

She came quickly toward him, gripped his wrist and peered into his face.

"What 'ave you bin doin'?" she asked.

He replied on a vague prompting, "Hush!"

"What 'ave you bin doin'—to 'im?" she asked again, her voice rising shrilly. "O God, I can't see your face 'ere!" She dragged him after her into the room. "What 'ave you done to him?" she asked once more.

THE REWARD

She had closed the door behind them, and was standing now with her back against it. Cowcross stood blinking at her in the strong unaccustomed light. Little green patches floated before his eyes. He saw that her face was marred and distorted by bruises and swellings. Her lips were puffed out and twisted awry so that it looked as if she were bursting with suppressed mirth. So had she tortured her flesh with her hands in her agony of suspense. . . . Her face, save for those disfiguring marks, was white as milk. The secret of her unfathomable eyes (it had often baffled him, he remembered) was revealed at last in a look of living tragedy. He stood before her, helpless and dumb, as she asked him yet again,

“What 'ave you done with him?”

A gesture of the hands was all the answer he could give.

“Open your mouth!” she cried. “For God’s sake, speak! . . . speak!”

She rushed at him, seized him by the lapels of his coat and shook him so that his grey head rolled on his shoulders helplessly.

“Speak, I tell you! . . . Speak!”

She released him and stepped back, searching his face for the truth.

“Dear Peter, do speak! Just tell me he’s safe. That’s all.”

“That’s all,” Cowcross repeated dully.

“He is safe?” She was shaking him again.

THE SPOILERS

He began to laugh. He swayed toward her.

"He!" cried Cowcross. "Yes, he is safe enough."

"Oh, thank God!" she exclaimed, with a sob.

She released her hold on him, and he tottered forward.

"He is dead," he said. "Dead!"

The words dropped from him in a strange, flat voice.

"Yes," he repeated, "he is dead. . . . I am sorry, now, I killed him. Very sorry. I need not have done it. It makes no difference, after all. No difference whatever."

A sound from Judith drew his gaze.

She was crouched down in an angle of the door, looking up at him. Her distorted face wore an expression of unspeakable hate, yet it retained a hideous suggestion of suppressed mirth, too. She resembled nothing human, cowering there. He turned away affrighted. He could not bear to look on her.

She began to laugh . . . softly, musically. She was one of those rare women who know how to laugh. Presently a harsh note stole into her laughter. And then a rending cascade of shrieks was drenching him with horror.

People came pouring into the room. There was a Babel of tongues.

The last fetters of madness and illusion fell from Cowcross like loosed shackles.

THE REWARD

He crossed over to one man who was grave and elderly and had a responsible air. He drew this man aside and spoke in his ear. The man paled, recoiled, then turned a scared grey face and regarded Cowcross keenly.

“ Will you wait here ? ”

“ I will wait,” said Cowcross.

The elderly man whispered to the other men at the door and went out. They all stood gazing at Cowcross, huddled and drawn together at the farther end of the room. The women had borne Judith away, but the sound of her laughter in the distance still could be heard faintly.

An abrupt movement by Cowcross was followed by a flash of steel and a horrid sound of choking. A ghastly figure rose from the place where he had been . . . a figure that seemed to wear a scarf of blood . . . that tore at its lacerated throat. . .

TWENTY-EIGHTH CHAPTER

LAST EXTRACT FROM THE DIARY OF MR.
SIDNEY GANDY, UNDATED.

THIS morning Mr. William Fix came to visit us, bringing with him the lady who has provided Walter's escutcheon with a bar sinister. He looks very old, and is, I should think, breaking up fast. We had a long consultation together on the subject of his affairs, and he confessed to me—it *was* something of a confession—that he is fairly well-to-do. He told me that he was very anxious to make a will at once, leaving his property to Mrs. Marketer (as she is called) and her child: and he asked me to allow myself to be nominated his executor. Now, I have reasons for doubting the past integrity of Mr. Fix: a fuller knowledge of the sources of his wealth would be rather reassuring to me. (Query: Would it?) I could hardly refuse him, however, since he was once kind to Walter, and Walter is so fond of him. Also, the thought that by withholding my consent I might be injuring Mrs. Marketer, weighed with me a good deal, too.

THE DIARY OF SIDNEY GANDY

Poor girl! she has been so ill. Her anomalous position, complicated by the birth of her child—a bonny mite!—makes her an object of deepest pity. So I said Yes. Foolishly, perhaps. But it is well to take a holiday occasionally from the labour of being wise.

The child had the hair and the eyes of our own Walter. I pointed out the likeness to Ivy. And Mrs. Marketer said: "Yes. Isn't Judith just like Deuce?"

My wife froze immediately. "I do not see the least resemblance," she said. "Why should there be any?"

I hardly liked to point out that they were step-brother and sister. It really is very tiresome. Mrs. Marketer blushed: although, of course, Ivy, in her innocence, does not suspect the truth concerning the relations that existed between her and the dead man. We all talked to the baby. We were quite feverish over it.

"No," repeated my predominant partner, showing (I thought) less tact than usual. "No. There is not the least resemblance."

She sat, tight-lipped, with her hands in her lap, and I saw a dimness in her eyes. I could not, and I cannot, understand what bee it is she has in her bonnet about Walter's parentage. She refuses to discuss the matter with me; but she insists that she knows whose son Walter is not, and that is Mr. Marketer's.

THE SPOILERS

They stayed until the evening, of course, having been expressly invited by Walter to meet him on his return from school to-day, the boy having written to us also to suggest this, but the invitation to them went first. Considerate! I thought, when his letter came, that Ivy was not over-pleased at finding him still so warmly disposed toward his old acquaintances. But she has an affection for the unfortunate young mother that is stronger than her unworthy jealousy: and, anyhow, the fiat of the autocrat had gone forth, and him she did not dare to disappoint. I think, as she saw Mrs. Marketer playing with her little Judith, laughing, looking ridiculously young, almost happy, and quite beautiful, she forgave her for having known Walter in the pre-historic days, and herself rejoiced in our visitor's joy.

We went out in a body to meet Walter at the station.

The women, aided and abetted by Snuff, made an unseemly fuss over him, of course. Certainly he has improved. He has grown quite tall. He now speaks—not English, of course, but the current schoolboy jargon that passes for it, and he has acquired some small airs of self-sufficiency which may be the outcome of his important appointment to the vice-captaincy of the Third XI. That he is popular with his fellows was plain from the lack of fuss they made at parting from him

THE DIARY OF SIDNEY GANDY

on the platform. "So long!" and a thump in the ribs was their farewell formula.

I got no chance of speaking with him apart until we reached home, Ivy and Mrs. Marketer annexing him bodily. So I had to talk politics with Mr. Fix, who, if unduly diffident, is wonderfully sound. In the hall I whispered to Ivy:

"Have you told him?"

"I left that for you to do," she said.

"Surely . . ."

"But, my dear," I protested, "I understood . . ."

"Walter," said she. "Your uncle has something to tell you."

And she left us alone together.

Walter regarded me with a look of suspicion.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing," I stammered.

How could I tell him? It was not fair to me for Ivy to act as she had done, after promising herself to break the news.

"I say, you two haven't been and gone and got married by any chance, have you?" he inquired.

His shrewdness dumbfounded me.

I could only nod in reply.

"I thought you might," he remarked. "I say, I haven't shown you my score-book, have I?"

THE END

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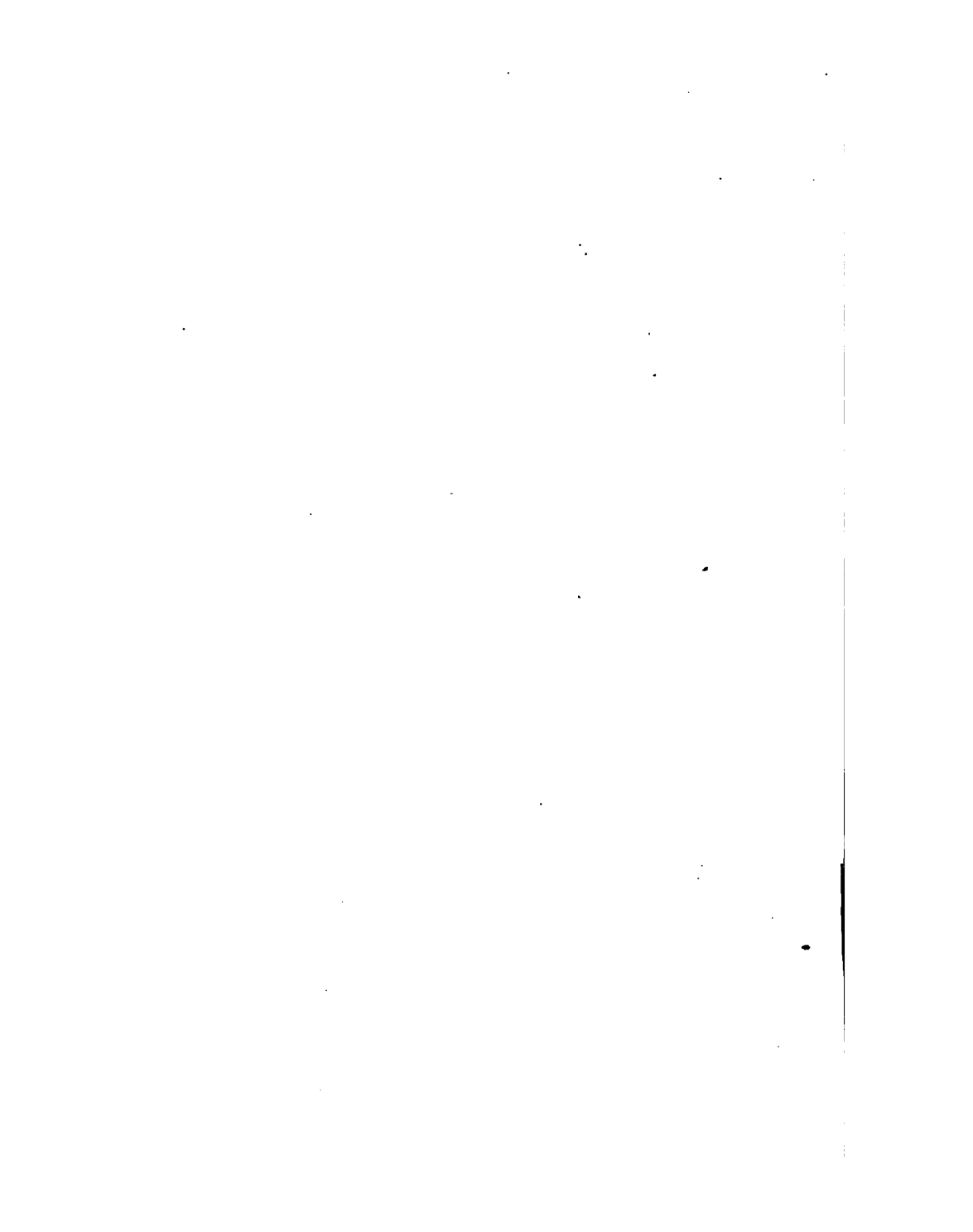
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